A
prince
AMONG
pirates
KATIE ABDOU

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A charming nobleman accidentally joins a pirate ship and falls for its debonair captain in this swashbuckling queer debut that's perfect for fans of F.T. Lukens and *Our Flag Means Death*.

Kit Davenport is in trouble—not that this would surprise anyone who knows him. Headstrong, reckless, and utterly unsuited for the stodgy House of Lords, Kit has spent years dodging his father's stern disapproval and delighting in clandestine rendezvous. But time is running out. With an arranged marriage looming and the confines of white wigs and stiff decorum closing in, Kit is desperate to escape a life that feels completely wrong for him.

His solution? A wildly impulsive decision that lands him aboard the *Deliverance*, a galleon captained by the infuriatingly charismatic Reggie Sharpe. With a devil-may-care attitude and a delicious grin, Captain Sharpe commands the waves with his crew of misfits... who all turn out to be pirates. Before Kit can say "wrong ship," he's trading ballroom etiquette for rum-soaked camaraderie, explosive gunfights, and, perhaps most excitingly, heart-stopping kisses under the stars.

But life at sea holds just as many secrets as treasures. And when Kit's past catches up with him, he'll have to decide who he truly wants to be: a gentleman or a pirate?

"**A seafaring adventure for fans of queer joy and old-fashioned swashbucklers.** Readers wishing for distant shores will be delighted by the unlikely family of outcasts who've chosen to belong to the sea, and to each other." —Don Martin, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Verity Vox and the Curse of Foxfire*

"**Clever, action-packed, and gloriously queer**, Katie Abdou crafts her debut novel with masterful humor." —CS Pacat, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Dark Rise*, *Captive Prince*, and *Fence*

Katie Abdou was born and raised in historic coastal Massachusetts, where she cultivated a love of history, the occult, and piracy. She aims for her books to be a safe place for teens and young adults to find representation and to understand the experiences of trauma, hardship, romance, and adventure through her characters within the safety of fiction. Katie lives in historical Massachusetts with her four fuzzy wee dragons. She is a writer, a costumer, a hiker, a baker, a winemaker, and most importantly: the Best Auntie in the World. *A Prince Among Pirates* is her debut novel. Visit Katie online at KatieAbdou.com.

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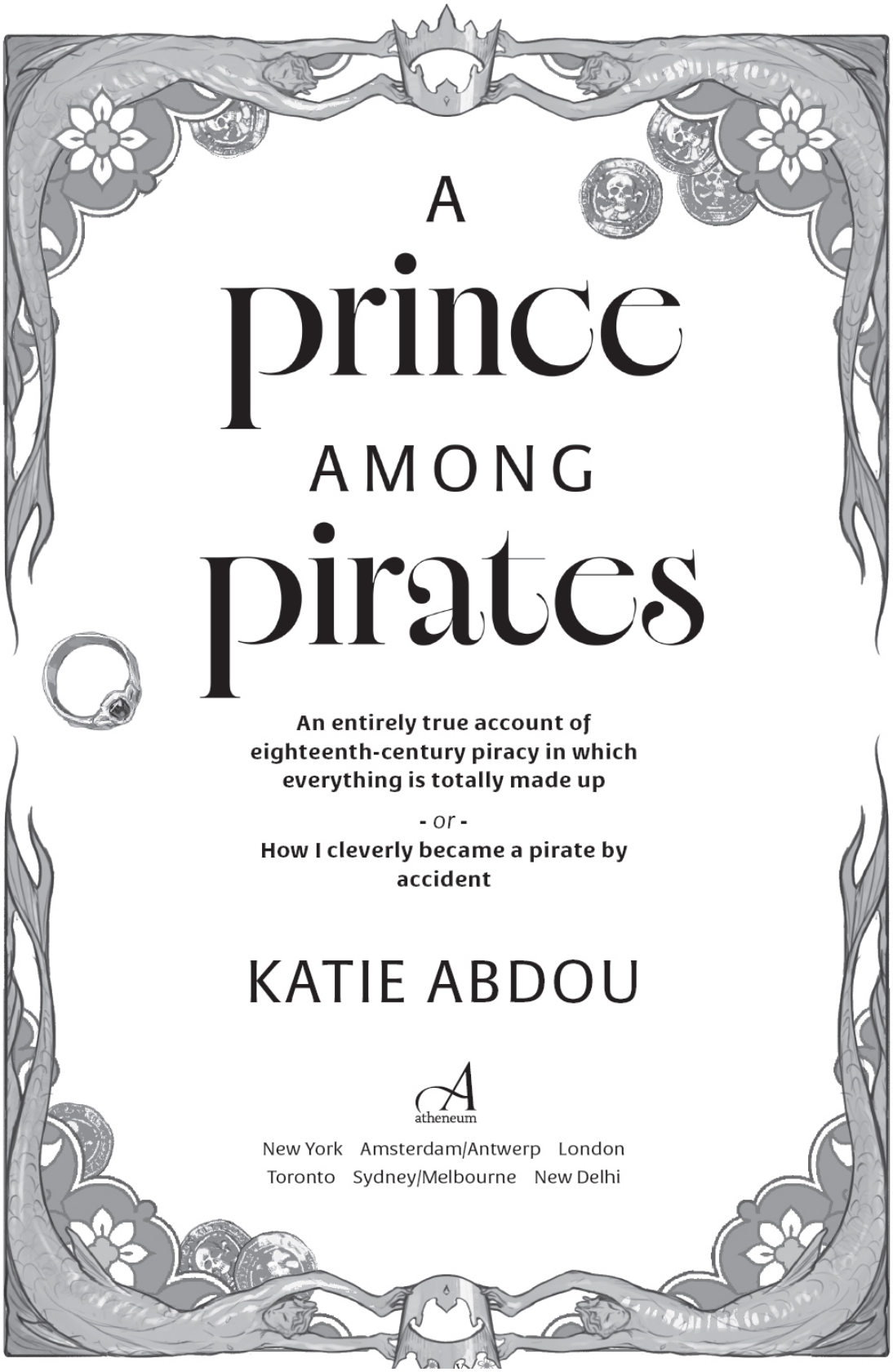

A prince AMONG pirates

An entirely true account of eighteenth-century piracy in which everything is totally made up

- or -

How I cleverly became a pirate by accident

KATIE ABDOU

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To my son, who might have
grown up to love pirates
and adventure,
if only he had gotten
the chance

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Dear Reader,

It would be remiss of me to send you off on your adventure armed with naught but your imagination and (probable) love of piracy. So, as they say: It's dangerous to go alone—take this!

The Golden Age pirates have been highly romanticized by modern society, and though they were often romanticized in their own time as well, the truth is that these villainous scoundrels were just that—even if we *do* like to imagine them as seafaring Robin Hoods and historical vigilantes. As such, because James E. Wadsworth, the author of *Global Piracy*, is holding a metaphorical flintlock pistol to my head (I'm kidding, he would never!), I should make sure you understand that the historical facts in this book are accurate, except where I am lying. That is to say, I have tweaked history in some places to fit my narrative—but only as far as it will be entertaining to you, the reader, and to me, the writer.

Except the word "fo'c'sle." That's a real word. It's the nautical term for forecastle, which is, in fact, pronounced "FOKE-sul." Make it make sense.

In addition to my flagrant disregard of actual history, I would like to warn you about certain content in this story. There will be mention of sexual assault, mention of the slave trade, and mention of child abuse and neglect. While these subjects are important to the story, if at any point you find the material distressing or triggering, you are encouraged to stop reading and return only if you feel ready. Your well-being is more important than completing this book.

And with that, I release you into my totally historically accurate* version of 17-something-or-other. Weigh anchor, adventurer!

🩶 Katie

** I am lying; this is a lie.*

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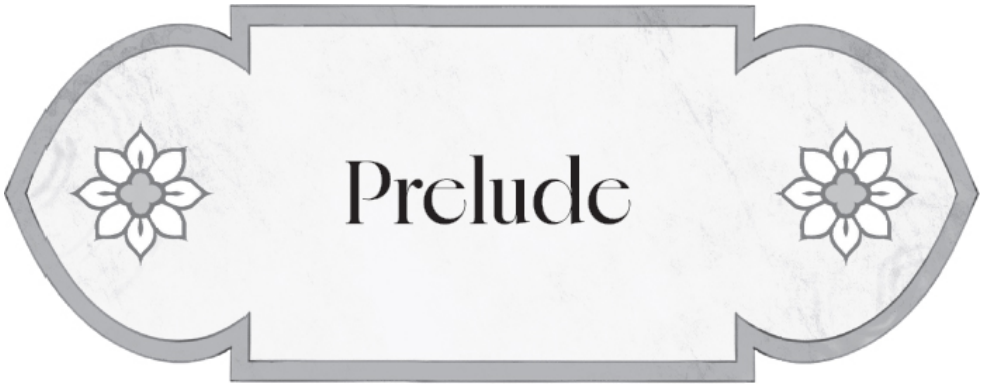

AUGUST 1700*(ISH)*

Cannon fire before breakfast is obscene—and waking up to it is an atrocity.

The haze of last night's exploits still fogs my mind as I tumble out of bed and hit the floor with an ungentlemanly grunt. The ship groans in agreement as it sways, sending my innards rolling. I want to vomit, but the second cannon blast shocks my system into waking. I have just enough sense to grab on to the wooden frame of the captain's bed as the ship lurches from the impact. Have we been hit? Or was it just the waves that sent us bobbing back and forth?

The question of why I woke up in pirate Captain Sharpe's bed will have to be a future Kit problem. I have neither the time nor the presence of mind to reflect on that particular matter at the moment.

The whereabouts of my trousers is another issue I dare not examine too closely. I search the cabin, find them—thank Christ—and manage to yank them on as another explosion fills the air. The silence that follows is both deafening and terrifying. It settles into my lungs like a living thing, dragging them down as I struggle to breathe. Then, somewhere beyond the

ringing in my ears, I can hear the crew scurrying about on deck as their shadows pass over the stained glass of the cabin door.

“Hoist a white flag!” someone calls from above. It isn’t the captain’s deep, melodious voice. It sounds more like the first mate. My stomach sinks—an anchor into a bottomless pit of fear that sends my blood rushing. I draw in a sharp breath as I come back to myself and rummage about for my waistcoat. I find it under Sharpe’s settee and dive for it, then haul it onto my shoulders. Mercifully, my stockings and shoes lay on the floor beneath it, and I am able to pull them on despite how much my fingers tremble.

We’ve been boarded. Unfamiliar voices are speaking on deck now. It doesn’t sound like English, but my ears are still ringing from the blasts, and I am uncertain if it’s a language I understand. Whatever it is, they sound angry.

I can hear Captain Sharpe’s voice now too, as calm as ever as he tries to placate our aggressors. The silhouettes of their bodies through the stained glass seem to be in uniform. There are flashes of blue, and red, and perhaps some white—which means they could be Spanish. Or French . . .

Or English.

Bloody hell, for countries constantly at war, we are certainly all lacking in originality. Who says a navy uniform can’t be a fetching shade of chartreuse or a sensible bisque?

No matter who it is out there harassing the crew of the *Deliverance*, they are almost certain to kill the men and arrest the captain now that they’ve got a thorough look at our colors. I am the wild card here. And it’s absolutely insane what I’m considering doing to intervene. This plan will most likely get myself and everyone else shot—but really, it’s hardly my fault these men decided to become pirates.

Still, they haven’t thrown me overboard yet, so I suppose I owe it to them to at least *try* to prevent a massacre.

I collect my cravat from where it peeks out beneath a pillow on the settee, sliding it under my collar and tying it deftly through muscle memory. At the last moment a glimpse of my trunk brings an idea bubbling up

through the haze of drink. I kneel before it and unlock it with the key I've carelessly left in the keyhole. The lid gives a small creak of complaint as it opens, but after digging through the tangle of clothes, I find my prize within a small velvet purse at the very bottom and slide it onto my first finger.

Dropping the lid shut once more, I stand with my back straight and then march toward the door. I am still quite drunk, but nonetheless, the swirling vortex of fear inside me stills as I smooth my thick hair back into a queue. Decision made, I am now utterly calm as I fall into the familiarity of being moments from doing something woefully ill-conceived. I throw open the door to the captain's cabin and march out on deck, equipped with my best disdainful glower, my chin tilted up in haughty disgust.

I am good at this game. For seventeen years I was trained in the art of snobbery. My father is a viscount, for Christ's sake, and a permanent member of the House of Lords. Of course, the crew of the *Deliverance* don't know that. I have kept it well and truly secret from them, for my own protection.

Until this moment.

"How dare you board my vessel?" I demand, ignoring the scandalized glare Captain Sharpe shoots my way, and the seven guns that are immediately trained upon me. "Have you the slightest inkling of who I am?"

My words, as I suspected, are met with a stunned silence.

Dear Reader, you might be wondering how a highborn lad such as myself got swept up into such wanton roguery. Allow me to set the record straight—as I would not be here but for the negligence of those who ought to have been keeping me in check.

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Part I

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One

MARCH 1700*(ISH)*

It’s not that I mislike breasts. I love breasts, but they are so much *work*! Why must they be caged behind layers of silk and whalebone, with thousands of tiny, tedious laces holding everything together? By the time I reach my prize, I’ve already lost interest. It is far less effort, not to mention more discreet, to tug open the lacing on the placket at the front of a pair of breeches. Which is how I came to be tucked away in the candleless dark of my father’s study with my hand down Digby Hale’s trousers at my own engagement party.

I know what you’re thinking: Digby Hale is an appalling name. Well, he’s rather an appalling lad as well. I have never found myself attracted to his nondescript appearance, nor his damp-cloth personality.

Nevertheless, he is a warm body and an eager mouth, and I am *very* drunk.

Still, the more time I spend crushed between Digby and the painstakingly categorized books on law and the glorious monarchy behind me, the less appealing I find him. It’s almost a relief to hear my father’s best

attempt at hiding his fury as he calls for me from somewhere deeper in the house.

"Christopher-Henry!"

I absolutely detest the way he says my name. Though, in all fairness, I detest my name in general: Christopher-Henry Mortimer Davenport. Yes, you read that right. I could say I am grateful to have not been named Digby Hale—but only just.

I shove Digby back a step. (A bit unkind perhaps, but he *did* just bite my lip, and I loathe rough play.) There is something wet on my fingertip as I wipe the corner of my mouth, but in the dark I can't tell whether it's blood or saliva.

"Kit—" he starts.

"Christopher-Henry!" my wretched father howls again.

I groan and turn my head toward the door. "I have to go. Don't follow me out."

"Your name is Christopher?"

Digby likely can't see the way my eyes roll. "No, it's Christopher-Henry," I whisper as I frantically lace up the front of my trousers. "We went to Eton together, for Christ's sake."

"I've never heard your Christian name before."

"Shut up, my father will hear us!" I hiss, swatting away his attempt to reach for me as I step over to the door. "Wait a few minutes before coming out, unless you want everyone to know what you were doing."

"What *we* were doing," he whispers back.

Annoying.

In lieu of a response, I smooth my shirt and waistcoat and step out into the well-lit hallway. I'm irritated to taste metal. The bastard broke skin when he bit me—I hate that. I wipe the blood off my lip with the cuff of my navy coat sleeve just as my father rounds the corner.

He isn't a big man, my father, but he *is* taller than I, with wide-set shoulders and an intimidating scowl permanently affixed to his pale face.

He has thick brown eyebrows, a jaw and nose that are both long and square, and dirty-blond hair tucked somewhere under that awful white wig, and I thank my good fortune every day that I look nothing like him. Though I wouldn't mind if I were a bit taller.

He towers over me and gestures furiously for me to start walking with him *immediately*. Despite the way my innards twist, I offer him my most charming smile as I step forward and allow him to corral me toward the ballroom. "I seem to have walked into a door and split my lip. I ought to tend to it."

He growls in my direction, but that is all he can do with so many people around—not that he has ever laid a hand on me—or ever *would*. "If you bring shame upon me or the marquess, I will give you a thrashing so thorough, you won't sit for a fortnight!" he snarls from behind me. "I won't have your cursed existence tarnishing this family any more than it already has. It's time for you to grow up and take responsibility for your actions, Christopher-Henry."

I don't answer him, though I wince at the comment about being cursed. But people are turning to watch us enter the ballroom now, so I let my smile widen into a grin and wave my hand with a flourish. "Forgive my tardiness," I announce to the room as my father falls into step beside me. "I got lost; it's *such* a big house."

My father makes a show of rolling his eyes as Elizabeth bustles to my side, my father's perfect, lily-white replacement child on her hip. I do my best not to scowl at my half sister as she sucks on her entire hand. Disgusting. It isn't Victoria's fault she was born, but I hate her just the same. I swat away Elizabeth's attempts to wipe the blood from my lip, and once again rub the silk of my cuff against the cut, much to her dismay. "I'm fine, Elizabeth."

"Christopher-Henry, call me *Mother*," she pleads in a whisper, a false smile plastered across her pretty face. She's barely one and twenty herself—only a few years older than I am—and already round with my father's next replacement child.

I don’t mind Elizabeth. In fact, I even rather *like* her . . . but I simply cannot tolerate her desire to be my mother. I *had* a mother—my *own* mother—and though my father has done his best to erase her from history, his efforts to keep me from learning about her have only heightened my desire to know more.

Elizabeth will never be her.

“But you aren’t my mother,” I remind her with an equally false, but far more convincing, smile on my face. Her youth aside, no one would believe her to be my mother anyway. She has milky skin and hair the color of autumn leaves. Her eyes are blue, and she is tall and stately with a smattering of freckles across her narrow nose.

By contrast, my skin is bronze, my eyes large and greenish, my hair nearly black and almost unmanageably thick. I am on the short side of average for my age, which is frustrating, but this is not to say I’m not attractive. I assure you, I am—it would be a waste of time to pretend otherwise—but I look nothing like any member of my living family. It is a source of both contention and relief for my father and me. I imagine looking at me is a constant reminder of my late mother, for I must have got these dashing good looks from *somewhere*.

My attention shifts to my betrothed, across the room. She’s wearing a soft pink dress adorned with lace and silk ribbons. It offsets the pretty brown of her hair and the pale white of her skin nicely. Though I cannot see them from where I stand, I know her eyes to be the deep blue of the distant ocean, and I can tell that she has enhanced the color of her cheeks with rouge.

I should be ecstatic, of course. She is the daughter of a marquess and comes with a handsome dowry and a title that outranks my father’s. She is beautiful and well mannered, and always has a smile for me—but in truth, ever since the betrothal, the very sight of her sets my teeth on edge.

She reaches for me as I approach her, and I take her hand, bow over it, and press a kiss to the back of her white glove, leaving a small blot of red behind over her ring finger.

How ominously appropriate.

I stand back upright and tuck her arm into mine to hide the mark. I must play the part of the dutiful fiancé for the remainder of the evening, with Katherine Stuart on my arm.

“Are you quite all right?” she whispers to me. “Your lip is bleeding.”

“Ah, nothing to worry about, my dear. I had an unfortunate run-in with a rake in father’s office.”

She gives her social laugh and touches my arm as if I were the most amusing man alive. I resist the urge to shrink away. Her touch revolts me, but it wasn’t always so. Merely weeks ago I would have reveled at her hand on my arm, her lips near my ear. I might even have stolen away with her in a dark hall, or a wooded area, and put her virtue in terrible danger.

But there is no fun in stealing away with someone when it is socially acceptable to do so. There is no fun in an arranged marriage, either—especially not one so clearly meant as a punishment from my father.

I wonder what led to him marrying my mother all those years ago. It’s hard to imagine the Viscount of Falmouth in love with anyone. She must have been a great beauty—irresistible and charming. How I wish I had known her. How I hate him for refusing to allow me to. It isn’t his fault she died, but he has kept her identity from me all this time, for reasons at which I can only guess. I steal a glance his way as Katherine blathers on about the daffodils and yellow table dressings for our wedding reception.

I detest yellow.

Eventually I spot Digby in the crowd, chatting with a group of our classmates from Eton. Their respective wives and fiancées stand with them, looking bored and trying their best not to. Had I not a shackle on my arm, I might convince one of them to slip away with me into the garden for a romp under the waning moon. There’s nothing quite as enjoyable as another man’s wife—but I suppose my own nuptials will put a hard stop to that.

Ugh, what an absolute bore! Flirting and having illicit affairs as a young bachelor is one thing—I am charming and irresistible in my current state—

but a wedded man bedding other people is just tacky. My life will be over before it has even begun.

Grief overwhelms me at the thought of what my life will be like six months hence: a wife round with child, and insufferable meetings in the House of Lords with my father. I am already suffocating at the thought of it. My days at Eton gave me some sense of freedom from my family, but they did little to quench my desire for something *else*—something apart from the stuffy life of the peerage. I want to experience the world, not just the tedious political intrigues of men who dress in monochrome and play chess with other people's lives. I'm meant to do something *more*.

And there is nothing I want less in life than to become my father.

"Forgive me," I interrupt. "I feel a touch light-headed."

"Are you ill?" Katherine asks, aghast.

"No," I assure her, donning my best charming smile. "Just need a bit of fresh air. I'll return with champagne for us both." Before she can argue, I extract myself from her grasp and escape to the balcony.

The cold night air fills my lungs, burning my insides, but at least now I can breathe again. I approach the railing and gaze out into the fathomless ocean below. The moon hangs over the black water, a rippling crescent of ivory dancing across its surface. All at once, I would like nothing more than to climb onto the rail and dive into the water.

The thought alarms me. I don't want to die—yet I am tempted all the same. The water is freezing, and I cannot swim, but my hands grip the railing, and my heart beats unevenly against my ribs as I stare down into the face of certain death. I could do it. I could just jump. My father would be so glad to have got rid of me without lifting a finger or carrying a guilty conscience—and I would be free. Dead, but free.

Except I don't want to die. I want to *live*.

I tear my hands away from the icy railing and step back, breathless and shaken. I stare out at the water as I try to collect myself . . . and catch sight of something black on the horizon.

“Do you think it’s a pirate ship?”

Startled, I whirl about, and I can’t hide my grimace when I see Digby looming in the open doorway. “Impossible to tell from here,” I say—although in truth there is no reason to think a pirate ship might be merrily sailing into port at Falmouth.

“I don’t understand the appeal of it,” Digby says, leaning against the rail beside me, though I certainly didn’t invite him to do so.

“Of piracy?” I ask. I should hope not.

“Of living at sea. Navy men and pirates alike.”

“Don’t let a navy man hear you say that,” I snort.

“My uncle is a navy captain,” Digby says. “He speaks of living at sea like a badge of honor, but my father says it’s just an excuse for buggery and lawlessness. Even in the navy.”

I balk at the thought of Lord Hale uttering the word “buggery” in front of his son but don’t say so. “Buggery and lawlessness?” I repeat, because I am feeling sassy. “Where do I sign up?”

It’s Digby’s turn to look disgusted. “You can’t bathe for *weeks*,” he informs me. “You would absolutely hate that.”

“You know nothing about me,” I counter, pointing at him. “You didn’t even know my name was Christopher-Henry.” But he’s right: Not bathing for weeks sounds positively dreadful. I turn back to the smudge of black on the horizon and wonder what life must be like for the men on board such a vessel.

“It would be quite an adventure,” I say—mostly to myself, as I’ve lost interest in Digby’s opinion. I don’t mean a word of it. I think. I just want to be contrary.

“If you’re into that sort of thing, I suppose,” Digby says, to no one.

On second thought . . . perhaps I *do* mean it.

I smile and turn on my heel to make my way back inside for the much-needed champagne I promised myself. As I cross the ballroom floor, my feet feel grounded for the first time all night.

I daresay, if only to annoy Digby Hale and the sleepy crowd around me, I may just be into *exactly* that sort of thing.

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Two

Dinner parties are insufferable.

Allow me to clarify—dinner parties that my father hosts are insufferable. I love a grand party where I am not pinned under the watchful eye of my father and his child-bride. But in my own home, where the servants act as his spies and I am the focus of attention, it is impossible to enjoy myself.

Tonight we are celebrating tomorrow's festivities with a grand dinner. And tomorrow my life will be over. Or rather, my life as a bachelor. My life as a free man. Tomorrow marks the first day of life as my father's copy.

I am not sure when it became the fashion to make such a fuss about a mere engagement—especially a politically arranged one that neither party is particularly chuffed about. Well, perhaps Kitty is. (Yes, that's what she has insisted I call her now.) "Kit and Kitty; isn't it so charming?"

I could have vomited all over her horrid blue gown.

Ordinarily, I am not one to complain about being the center of attention. But in this I feel *trapped*. The goddamned prince is here, for Christ's sake! Why the Crown Prince of England cares about my nuptials, I will never

know. But here he is, sitting beside me at my father's table, complimenting the quality of the predinner soup.

I would give anything to slither out of my seat and make my escape by way of the magical fortress I used to pretend existed under the dining table. It is a massive, solid piece of furniture, this table, with ornate, hand-carved flowers along its perimeter. It is always waxed to a high shine that borders on obscene—which seems pointless, as there is a large white linen covering the entire expanse of it tonight.

In a garish display of wealth and waste, my father has ordered a taper on a silver candlestick arranged between each place setting, casting the entire room in a warm, flickering glow. Shadows move across the pink jacquard wallpaper and ivory painted wainscoting in an elegant dance. I might be impressed by the show of it all, were it not for my irritation. I am far from humble, but showing off like this feels somewhat *distasteful*.

At least Elizabeth had the good sense to store my sister away for the evening. The thought of Victoria screaming and dripping snot on Prince Henry is just too much.

"You must be looking forward to becoming a husband, Christopher-Henry," the prince murmurs to me over the top of his wineglass.

He isn't an unattractive man, I suppose—for a man in his forties. His hair is dark, with an unruly wave pattern that he seems to have embraced rather than hidden under a formal wig. He has a long, narrow nose and an angular jaw, both of which may have been more appealing when he was a young man. With the bags under his eyes and the frown lines that crease the skin around his mouth, however, they now give him a rather ghoulish appearance. Or perhaps that is just a trick of the shadows twirling across his face.

I dare not contradict him, but I won't agree with him either, so I only smile as I bring my own glass to my lips.

"Come now," he whispers conspiratorially, as if we were old school chums. "You'll enjoy the wedding night well enough." He turns his gaze to my betrothed across the table.

My brow twitches as I try to hide my disgust. It's one thing for *me* to think or say such things, but for the crown prince to leer openly at *my* fiancée and speak of matters of this kind at the dinner table is quite another.

I glance at Kitty and actually feel pity for her. "I'm sure she will make a perfectly adequate wife," I say carefully.

"I daresay she will," the prince agrees, sitting back in his chair. "She is my goddaughter, you know."

I did not.

"I had no idea, Your Grace."

"I thought, as a wedding gift to my goddaughter and her betrothed, I might bestow upon you a title of your own. I can't have my goddaughter marrying down in the peerage, after all."

A title? Is that supposed to tempt me? I don't want the title that is my birthright—so why would I want another? But I do my very best to appear graciously surprised and not offended by his backhanded insult. "Your Grace—"

"Do not thank me yet," he says. I had not planned to. "You will have to wait until your wedding feast tomorrow to know more."

My what? The prince plans to attend *my* wedding feast? Perhaps I should be honored, but instead panic settles into my gut. Why is the Crown Prince of England planning to attend my wedding feast, goddaughter or no? I offer him a brief smile, which I'm sure is more of a grimace than anything, and promptly bury my nose in my wineglass to avoid suffering through any more conversation.

The remainder of dinner goes exactly as one might expect it to—stiff, polite conversation, which slowly suffocates me until I am sure I will pass out or simply *die*. So when my father invites all the men in attendance for an after-dinner brandy, I make my excuses and slip out into the garden for a breath of fresh air.

Father doesn't argue; the last thing he wants is to share a companionable drink with me. But I'm not out there long before a shadow looms behind

me.

“Are you not cold?”

I *am* cold. I’m freezing my bollocks off, but I turn to Prince Henry and force a smile. “Not terribly,” I lie. “I’m not much of a fan of brandy.”

“Or of your father, it would seem.”

I go very still and stare at the prince. I’m sure my expression falls into one of dismay, but I cannot control my face for the moment. “Your—”

“I mean nothing by it,” he insists, with a smile nearly charming enough to compete with my own, were he twenty years younger. At least the bags under his eyes aren’t quite as defined out here under the blue-toned shine of the moon.

“Forgive me if I seem ungrateful,” I say. “I am, of course, honored that Your Grace plans to attend my wedding . . . but I don’t understand why.”

Prince Henry laughs and claps a hand onto my shoulder in a far-too-familiar gesture that is both unprincely and alarming. “I have known your father a very long time, Christopher-Henry. Not to mention your mother.”

My heart leaps into my throat at the mention of my mother. All at once I am sure I am going to lose my supper, and one hand flies to my stomach in preparation. “My mother?” I ask, breathless. No one has ever mentioned her to me—despite my constant nagging on the subject.

“Oh, yes,” Prince Henry says, his expression softening. He appears younger and almost handsome as he smiles fondly at some memory. Is that smile meant for *my mother*? I’m both horrified and intrigued. “I remember the day she arrived from the Ottoman Empire with her family. She was striking in her beauty. You look so much like her, you know.”

I am reeling as his words sink in. I have always suspected my mother was not English—my complexion alone is proof of that—but that was the extent of my knowledge until this moment. I swallow down the lump forming in my throat. “Do I?” I ask, and I hate how my voice cracks.

“Of course,” Prince Henry says with another laugh. “Do you not agree?”

I have often wondered what my mother looked like. I bet she was beautiful, but I have never seen her likeness. My father has no paintings of her, nor a locket with her portrait I might have cleaved to as a child. Talk of my mother has always been strictly banned in this house.

“I am sure I would agree with you had I ever laid eyes upon her, Your Grace,” I say when I’ve regained control of my senses. “My father . . .” I lick my lips as I come up with an appropriate lie. “My father hadn’t the chance to have her likeness painted before she died.”

Prince Henry frowns, his mouth turning down. “No?” he asks. Is he angry, or is that pity? I can’t tell, and it unnerves me to see such an expression almost as much as it unnerves me to be having this conversation at all. He seems to remember himself and shakes his head. “Such a pity,” he decides. “She was a rare beauty, your mother.”

I want to cry. I want to get away from the prince and his sudden sincerity. I prefer to mislike him and his leering, crass comments—his kindness terrifies me. “Your Grace,” is all I can manage, my voice tight and halting. I swallow once more, but that damned lump refuses to budge.

“I had best go back in and entertain your father,” the prince says, with one last smile.

All I can do is nod stiffly and force my body into a neat bow as he turns to make his way inside. I stare at his back as he disappears into the house, and only when my lashes turn to ice do I realize I have lost control of my emotions.

It feels like an eternity has passed before the house finally goes still for the night. Every inch of my skin itches as I pace back and forth in my bedroom. My wedding suit is laid out neatly on the settee at the foot of my bed, staring at me—taunting me. My father chose black. How very fitting for the funeral of my youth and happiness.

I turn away from it and press the heels of my hands into my eyes. Tonight has been strange and terrible, and I am more agitated than ever. It isn't enough that I must sign away all hopes of living a life of my own tomorrow evening, but this business about my mother, and the prince's soft smile when he spoke of her, has my stomach in knots.

The trunk beneath my window catches my eye, and before I have consciously made the decision, I am suddenly in motion. I pack frantically, stuffing as much into the trunk as I can without taking the time to properly fold anything. I don't even stop to consider whether the waistcoats I pack match the jackets I choose—that's how frantic I am.

By the time I've finished, there are small piles of discarded garments on the floor and a few bits of fabric poking out from the seam of my trunk. I leave it there and slip out of my room, glancing back at the bedroom of my childhood for a mere second before I make my way along the hallway and shuffle down the stairs as quietly as I can manage.

What am I doing? What am I *doing*? Before I can muster an answer, I am sitting at my father's desk, prying open the locked drawer where I know he keeps his banknotes. It opens with a crack and I freeze, gaze darting to the shadow of the door. I wait with bated breath, but nothing happens.

I can't even allow myself a sigh of relief. Exhaling quietly through my nostrils, I snatch up a bag of coin and as many notes as I can take without making an obvious dent. Just before I close the drawer, my name catches my attention: *Christopher-Henry*, written across an envelope in an unfamiliar, looping hand. I reach for it, taking in the frayed folds and water-stained corners. I haven't the time to read it now, but I tuck it into the pocket of my jacket with the bag and notes. Then I push the drawer shut and rise from my father's chair. The coins are heavy in my pocket, but not quite as heavy as that envelope.

As I make to step around his desk, the glint of gold catches my eye, and I freeze. Tucked beside my father's flint box and sealing wax is the signet ring with our family crest on it—two lions on either side of a chevron shield. I have no obvious need of it, but something tells me to snatch the

ring anyway, so I do. I drop it into the purse before I can change my mind, and hurry from the room.

There are no servants in the hall, so I make my way back up to my bedroom. I open the trunk once more and shove my stolen booty deep into the folds of fabric, before tucking everything neatly inside. I drop the lid, lock it, and pocket the key, then stand back to admire my handiwork.

What a bloody disaster.

How am I to get this monstrosity down the stairs and out into the street without being heard or seen? It seems impossible, but my pulse is rushing through my ears and leaving no room for rational thought. I take the trunk by the handle and drag it as quietly as I can across the floor. I can move it barely an inch at a time, but the slow progress works in my favor to prevent any loud scraping sounds it might otherwise have made.

I'm quite certain *hours* pass before I get the trunk to the top of the stairs, and just as I feel I might burst into tears and give up, I hear a soft gasp behind me. I spin about and nearly pitch down the staircase, saved only by my firm grasp on the leaden trunk's handle.

It is far later than I thought, for the lad who delivers our milk and eggs for breakfast is staring up at me with wide eyes, a scone in one hand.

He isn't supposed to be in the foyer, and he certainly isn't supposed to be eating our food. (I suspect one of the kitchen maids must fancy him.) I hardly mind his egregious overstep, however—I can use it to my benefit. I grin at him and release the trunk, hurrying down the stairs before he can escape.

"You, lad," I whisper. "A shilling to take my trunk out to the front of the house."

He eyes me suspiciously as I pull a shiny coin out of my pocket. Fair enough.

I withdraw two more coins and hold them out as well. "And two more for your discretion."

“Yes, Your Lordship,” he says through a mouthful of scone as he takes the coins from my hand. I don’t correct his misuse of my title. I merely smile and clap him on the back, then glance up the stairs once more. Somehow, no one has woken up yet. I suppose the sheer number of empty wine bottles at dinner is to blame for that small mercy.

He climbs the stairs with more grace than one might expect from a farmhand, shoves the scone into his pocket—revolting—and lifts my trunk with an ease that sends my bollocks straight back into my body out of pure shame. “We ought go round the back instead,” he suggests.

Thoroughly emasculated but too terrified at the prospect of being caught to concern myself with it, I follow him through the kitchens, snatching a pastry from the counter on my way out. It’s only as he is loading my trunk onto his wagon that I realize I am to give him further instruction and indicate my imminent destination. I panic as I scramble up beside him and hoist my collar to my chin, as if it will somehow protect me from the thing I have just done.

I can’t think of anywhere in England I might go where my father cannot find me. Helplessly, I turn to look at the lad beside me, and his brows rise. “To the docks, Your Lordship?” he asks.

“Yes,” I say, as if that were the plan all along. The wagon lurches forward, leaving my stomach behind.

Soon Kitty will be waking to bathe in rose-scented water so she might smell sweet for our nuptials. Soon she will be carefully laced into the no-doubt-extravagant gown she has chosen for this special day. Soon she will make her way into the foyer with a delighted smile on her face, and her heart will shatter into pieces when she finds out her betrothed has jilted her like a coward. Like a thief in the night.

But I cannot bring myself to feel bad for her. She doesn’t know it yet, but I have saved her from certain unhappiness. My selfishness has spared us both from a loveless marriage. One day, I am sure, she will thank me—but that day is not today.

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On the docks my senses are grievously assaulted by the odor of rotting fish and the constant clamor of bells and shouting. (I detest shouting—it's so inelegant. Even when he's at his angriest, my father's bellowing can hardly be described as mere *shouting*.) I grimace and flinch away as a man passes by with a hand-drawn cart full of—dear God, whatever it is, it reeks something awful. I dare not look too closely.

All the same, some small part of me is grateful for the distraction from my imminent panic. What was I thinking, allowing that farm boy to bring me to the *docks*, of all places?

To avoid thinking about the very real probability of my untimely death by drowning, I find a sturdy-looking man in naught but shirtsleeves and brown trousers and offer him a shilling to carry my trunk for me.

He pockets my payment with a nod. "Which ship is yours?"

"Ah . . ." I can't help the uncomfortable giggle that bubbles out of me at the question. "Perhaps I misspoke. I don't own a ship. I'm looking to book passage on one."

"Meaning . . . there is no ship."

“There are plenty of ships,” I say as I gesture broadly to the numerous ships before us. “I’ve yet to buy passage on one.”

The man eyes me suspiciously. “Runnin’ away from home, lordling?”

Were I a cat, the fur along my back might bristle at that question. As it is, I am a gentleman—and gentlemen do not bristle. “I—”

“For a crown, I’ll find you a ship.”

I balk. “A *crown*? Sir—”

“I’ll even book your passage.”

I let out a huff, but what else can I do? I have no idea how one books passage on a ship. That is, I have been *on* a ship before, but I have never had to stoop to purchasing my own passage, nor arranging for my trunk to be carried.

“Fine,” I mutter, making it clear through my tone I am annoyed as I reach into my purse. “I’ll pay you once my trunk is on board,” I say, showing him the coin. “I’m good for it.”

He narrows his eyes but likely assesses—correctly—that he could snap me in half over one knee if I tried to swindle him. “Very well, then,” he says. “Where you runnin’ to, lordling?”

I choose to ignore the implication and wave my hand vaguely. “Somewhere fun.”

He snorts, which is as revolting as it sounds, and turns to make his way toward the ships. I sit on my trunk with a sigh and watch him go.

Eventually he returns—though he is gone long enough that I forget his face. When he approaches me, it takes me a few moments to realize why he is staring at me with his hands on his hips. I slide off the trunk as gracefully as I can manage, for I am utterly exhausted from staying up all night. I don’t ask him if he’s found me a ship. Instead I just stand back as he hauls my trunk up and makes his way through the crowd.

I follow, grateful that his largeness and the size of my trunk force the crowd to part as we walk. Then, abruptly, he drops my trunk onto the dock and motions toward the nearest ship. I cast him a quizzical look, torn

between demanding an explanation and scolding him for manhandling my belongings.

“You got to talk to the captain to board,” he says.

“Is that not what I paid *you* for?” I demand.

“No.”

Well, shit. I stare at my trunk, then glare at him. I am trying to decide whether I should leave my trunk with him or send him off without payment when a tall man with a greying queue and sun-kissed bronze skin steps up to us both.

“This him, then?” he asks.

I am flabbergasted, but my manservant—you’ll have to forgive me here, I never got his name—answers for me. “Aye, this is the lordling.”

“I’m—” I begin.

“You’ll have to come with me, lordling,” interrupts the grey-haired man.

I grit my teeth. “Are you the captain of this vessel?”

He laughs, and I’m surprised by the pleasantness of it. It disarms me.

“No, lad. The captain’s in his quarters. If you want passage on the *Deliverance*, you have to speak with him.”

I glance between them and wonder if I am being hoodwinked or if this is just how it works. I dare not argue and make myself look any more ridiculous than I already feel. Instead I raise my chin and sigh. “Very well.”

I follow him across the gangplank, doing my absolute best not to look down into the dark waters of the berth. I am not a fan of water, but I can think of no other way to well and truly escape my father’s tyranny.

My heels make a satisfying clack with each step as I follow the man as far as the mast. He stops me short with a held-up hand. “Wait here.”

I hate being ordered about as if we were equals—or *worse*, as if he were my superior. Still, I say nothing as he continues toward a door with a rather fine stained-glass inlay. Well, at least my temporary manservant found me

an adequately adorned ship. No doubt the staterooms will be comfortable enough for a voyage.

I tap the sole of my shoe impatiently and glance around as the crew move about on deck and in the rigging.

“Who’s that, then?” I hear one of them say. I don’t turn to face him but allow myself to peek through my periphery. He’s young, with long, straight reddish-brown hair pulled back into a loose queue at the back of his neck and no facial hair.

“Dunno,” says his companion, who has shorter hair and a smart beard—though since I am not looking straight at them, I could swear they wear the same face. Both are sun-kissed and fair. “Sure is fancy-lookin’, ain’t he?”

Before I can get a better glance at them, they disappear belowdecks, and a shadow looms across my vision. I turn my attention back to the silver-haired man. “The captain will see you now,” he says as he waves his arm toward the stained-glass door.

“Thank you,” I say, careful to keep my tone neutral. It would be unwise to be impolite when I am alone on their ship; I am simply terrible in a fistfight.

I approach the door and knock briskly upon the glass, tilting my ear toward it. A deep voice beckons me inside, and I step in, closing the door behind me.

I stop short as the door clicks shut, for the entire cabin is shrouded in darkness, save the blobs of colored light streaming in through the stained glass. I feel a momentary rush of panic, convinced that I am about to be robbed—or kidnapped and ransomed to my despicable family. That would certainly put a damper on the dramatic escape from my nuptials.

I am about to say something when that deep voice says, “I hear you’d like to sail with us.” It’s smooth and low, like distant thunder on a hot summer evening. I can’t help the shiver that zips up my spine.

There is the spark of flint and then nothing. I think this was meant to be some sort of reveal, but it takes three more tries before the char cloth lights,

and then the smell of sulfur fills the room as a match is dipped into the flame. The blue glow isn't enough to light the space, but quickly it floats up and morphs into the flicker of a candle. The warm light illuminates the top of a grand desk, an array of papers and books strewn across its surface.

"Why is that?" the captain asks.

A smile pulls at the corner of my mouth, and my galloping heart stumbles back into a clumsy cantor. Though the flash of the flint had startled me into jumping, I am sure he could not see it in the dark. I understand now that he is putting on a show for my benefit. It's almost successful.

"Very dramatic," I say, stepping forward and clasping my hands behind my back. "Does that usually work for you?"

I watch as the candle floats up and tilts. Another candle lights, and then another. There is the silvery glint of a candelabra. A fourth candle lights, and then the captain sets the first back onto his desk. The room has a warm glow to it now, the flames casting sharp shadows that dance across the walls. I can see the shape of him.

"Yes," he admits—and I can hear amusement in that rich baritone.

The candlelight shimmers across the gold buckle of his belt, the butt of a pistol. I let my eyes rake over the desk, where I can now see more than just papers. A cup with ivory dice sits just under the candelabra, beside a magnifying glass with a tusk for a handle. A string of shark teeth hangs from one of the arms of the candelabra, brushing against a map with a compass weighing it down.

"You didn't answer my question," the captain says. His voice has moved behind me now. I turn to face his silhouette in the kaleidoscope of colors from the stained-glass door, alarmed by how silently he was able to move. I think he is trying to intimidate me, but I am struggling to keep from smiling at this dramatic charade.

"Does the sea call to you?" he asks, stepping closer to me. I think I could listen to him speak all day. His accent is slight, almost like he's worked to cover it up. Which wouldn't surprise me—it's a common practice

in England for children to be schooled in their accents. Or perhaps he spent a great deal of his youth traveling and picked up on more than one accent in that time; quite likely for a sailor. “Or . . . are you running from something?”

At first I could have sworn he was an Englishman. But he occasionally pronounces his vowels almost like an Irishman, elongating them. His consonants are sharp, or sometimes dropped altogether—yet at the same time, he enunciates letters I would leave silent. I’ve never heard an accent like his.

I can see him in the orange glow from the candles. He is close enough that the candlelight rivals the faded sun streaming through the stained glass. His skin is the rich brown of beach sand as the evening tide rolls out, and his hair is twisted into purposeful locs, pulled loosely back from his handsome face and falling over his shoulders. He has a short beard that spreads across his strong jaw, with just a bit of silver streaking through it. There are beads woven into his hair—though some of them look more like shark teeth than ivory.

All at once I am charmed by his attempts to intimidate me with theatrics. A pretty face truly can fix anything. Had he been old and unpleasant in appearance, I am ashamed to admit that I would have laughed at him. Instead I smile slowly and narrow my eyes a little.

“I have a taste for adventure,” I answer. “I want to explore the world before I have to settle down into the boring inevitability of married life.”

The captain chuckles and moves across the room. My gaze follows the sound of his heels, and then, with a rustle of fabric, the room is flooded with light. I squint against it. While my eyes adjust, I watch the captain as he ties back a second curtain. Then I use this opportunity to take in his quarters.

They are richly decorated, with a bed far more luxurious than one might expect on a ship, heavy velvet curtains drawn back on either side. In the center of the room is a settee with a black woven coat draped across the

back and a tea table that might once have been beautiful but is now nicked and scratched, and covered in an alarming array of weapons.

“This is not a pleasure barge,” the captain explains as he returns to my side. “You’ll have to earn your keep on this ship.”

That pulls me out of my musings, and I turn to the captain with brows raised and eyes wide. I stare at him long enough to assess that he is not having another jest, and chuckle. “That’s unfortunate,” I say. “For I am dreadfully allergic to exertion.”

The captain smirks, and I swear I hear a subtle puff of laughter. (Who can blame him? I *am* exceedingly charming.) “If it’s adventure you’re after, I doubt you’ll find another ship better suited to that purpose.”

I cannot tell whether he is trying to convince me to stay or go. Or perhaps he does not care either way. His eyes move over me, and I find myself standing taller as he takes my measure, which is a bit pathetic.

“I wouldn’t put someone like you in too physically demanding a position,” he continues, his full lips pulling back into a smile at my expense. “And I could hardly put you into the rigging. You’d fall to your death immediately—and that would leave me a man down.”

“Charming,” I mutter.

“Can you read and write?”

I blink, and my brow twitches. Is he *trying* to insult me? “Of course.”

“And do sums?”

“I was educated at Eton,” I say carefully. I am intrigued now. Working, dreadful and base as it sounds, might actually bring some amusement to my days while on board.

“How is your arithmetic, then?” the captain asks, stepping past me now and moving around me in a half circle.

I don’t give him the satisfaction of turning to watch him. Instead I smirk and stare ahead. “Oh, quite excellent,” I say. “It’s especially easy for me, as I’ve all my fingers and toes. You’ll have to promise to protect my digits so I can continue to count efficiently.”

He laughs, which is fortunate. My father has warned me on more than one occasion that my mouth will get me killed someday. At least the captain, for what it's worth, seems to be somewhat endeared to my flagrant insubordination.

"How fortuitous," he says, a smile in his voice. "I am in need of someone to handle my ledger. The man who previously filled that position . . ." He hesitates, and I cannot help but turn to read his expression. "Left."

I mislike the way he paused to consider his words, but his face is impassive. I am nothing if not a lover of beautiful things, and this man is beautiful indeed. A few hours a day doing sums in exchange for escape, adventure, and a chance to occasionally admire him in the sun and wind is something I could put up with.

I grin up at him. "So long as these hands stay soft and intact," I say, holding them up, "you have yourself a deal, Captain."

"Hmm. What's your name, lost little cat?" the captain asks as he pulls out the chair at his desk and drops into it with the grace of a drunkard who thinks he's still in full control of his faculties.

I clear my throat and clench my teeth. Shit—I hadn't thought about that. Well, I can't give my real name. That will lead to one of two things: being dragged back to my father for a reward, or being *ransomed* to my father and possibly killed once the sum is paid.

I decide I needn't give my full name. "Kit," I say at last.

If the captain is suspicious of the delay, he is instantly distracted by his own amusement. "Is that so?"

I realize my fatal error, for I have given him ammunition to tease me further.

"Kit, is it?" There is a mischievous glint in his dark eyes as he laces his fingers together across his stomach. "A lost kitten, then."

I suck in a breath as my belly does a strange little loop. This epithet makes me feel a certain kind of way, and I dare not examine too closely

what that might mean. I swear I could kick myself, were it physically possible. I grimace briefly.

“Kit Mortimer,” I amend. Though I detest the name, it is better to go by it now, as there isn’t a soul living or dead who would ever suspect me of willingly going by the name Mortimer.

The captain’s lips draw back into a toothy half grin. “Pleasure to meet you, Kit Mortimer,” he purrs. “I’m Captain Sharpe. Welcome aboard the *Deliverance*.”

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"You *must* be joking."

"Abject horror" is the only way I can describe the feeling in my gut as I stare into the dimly lit dampness of the fo'c'sle belowdecks. Surely, this is some kind of jest at my expense.

The room has a lived-in quality that suggests it has never made acquaintance with a mop. Nor has fresh air ever been allowed to permeate the space, as my nose is brutally assaulted with a cocktail of body odor, stale grog, and sick. Dingy grey-brown hammocks hang around the room, stacked in twos. I think at one time they must have been white, but no longer.

I turn to the whiskerless, silver-haired man, who I've discovered is the ship's first mate. His name is Tydes, which seems a jest in itself, but he has assured me it is his true name. "You have a stateroom for me, surely," I press.

He stares back at me without the slightest hint of amusement. He points to a hammock strung a few feet from the door. "Your stateroom, *my lord*," he says, voice positively dripping with disdain.

My stomach drops and my shoulders sag. Not only is Mr. Tydes unamused by me, he appears to actively mislike me—which is just preposterous. Everyone likes me. My mind races as I try to come up with an alternative solution to our problem, for that is what it is: *our* problem. If I am not given appropriate lodgings for my rank, I will make sure to let my displeasure be known.

Constantly.

"If you don't like it, you can string up a hammock on deck with the men who prefer to sleep under the stars," Mr. Tydes grunts. "Or you can see yourself off the *Deliverance*."

I'm sure he would simply love that. In fact, I'm rather considering it when there is a strange shift in the ship below my feet. I glance around, as if the hammocks and stench might have answers for me.

Mr. Tydes smirks at me, his eyes crinkling in a way that could almost be friendly, were he not an ornery old bastard with apparently no sense of humor. "We're weighing anchor, lordling. Best settle in."

"Weighing *what*?" I ask, nearly losing my footing as the ship shifts again beneath me. My eyes widen and I realize what he means. We're putting out to sea, *now*, and I no longer have the option of boarding another ship.

I open my mouth to complain further, but Mr. Tydes has already turned his back on me and is making his way up on deck. Following him out into the chaos of men bustling about, doing whatever it is sailors do to make a ship sail, I scan the crowd for my temporary manservant and realize both he *and* my trunk are nowhere to be found.

"My things!" I shout to absolutely no one in particular. Nobody is paying attention to me, though a few men give me strange glances as they pass by.

Panic sets in, and for a moment all I want to do is curl up in a ball right here on the ship's deck. I don't, of course—how humiliating would that be?—but I do march forward, dodging sailors as I make my way back to the

stained-glass door of the captain’s cabin. I knock briskly on the glass and cross my arms as I wait for him to emerge.

He doesn’t, and I cannot hear over the shouts of the crew behind me if he has given me leave to enter. Well, I won’t be left standing out here like a fool. I’m a viscount, for Christ’s sake! (Almost.) I turn the handle, pleased to find the door unlocked. Before anyone can stop me, I let myself into the cabin.

The curtains along the gallery windows are drawn back now, so I can see around the room fairly well. The weapons that littered the table are now mounted along one wall. Before I can consider why the captain has need of so many weapons, I spot my trunk at the foot of the rather grand four-poster bed, which appears to be built into the wall.

The captain is not here to see my disgruntled expression as I stomp over to my trunk and check the lock. It is unscathed, so at least no one has tried to rob me. Still, I have no intention of leaving my things unattended here. I glance at the small settee bolted to the floor in the middle of the room. Leaving my trunk where it is, I go to the settee and sink into the cushions with a sigh. Despite the hollering outside, the captain’s cabin is relatively peaceful.

As much as it pains me to admit, Digby was right: I am no adventurer. I have been on this ship for less than an hour, and I am already spent.

But the thought of Digby Hale stiffens my resolve. No, I cannot allow that dishrag of a milksop to have one up on me—even though he will never know it, as I plan to disappear over the horizon and never return to the shores of Falmouth again. Come hell or high water, I will make something of myself. (Preferably without either of those things.) It sounds a bit dramatic, but I mean it—Digby, my father, and the prince’s opinions of me be damned.

It’s time I drew my own path in the sand.

When I wake, I am instantly horrified. I sit up and scrub my hands across my face. My first thought is that I hope my father didn't catch me sleeping in the sitting room—but then I look up and am met with the unreadable expression of Captain Sharpe.

"Comfortable, Mr. Mortimer?"

I grimace at the name. "Ugh, anything but that."

His brows rise, and I realize he is expecting me to cower before him. I won't—I technically outrank him. I draw myself to my feet and calmly smooth out my waistcoat, deliberately taking the time to right my clothes. It is a power play, and I can tell by the way his expression shifts to one of dismayed amusement that he is well aware of what I am doing.

"You stole my trunk," I say before he can speak.

He balks and glances to the trunk at the foot of his bed. "I have no interest in your fancy britches."

I clear my throat before I can laugh. "I cannot be expected to sleep in a hammock with the crew."

"Would you prefer to sleep in the brig?"

It's my turn to look dismayed. I take a step back and place a hand on my chest for dramatic effect. "I beg your pardon—"

"Begging is usually best done on your knees."

All right. I see I am well matched with Captain Sharpe.

"Please," I implore, opening my hands. "There must be a stateroom you can supply for me."

"Must there be?" he asks, and I am quickly growing tired of this dance.

I sigh and let my hands fall to my sides. "Captain. I have no intention of sleeping in a dingy hammock in a room with fifty other men."

"You are not a guest on this ship, little kitten," Captain Sharpe says. "You agreed to become a member of my crew, did you already forget?"

"Of course not, but—"

“Then as a member of my crew, you will sleep *with* the crew. My officers are awarded private cabins for their loyalty and hard work. You are not one of my officers. In fact, you are not yet officially one of my crew. You do not come to me making demands.”

I frown and motion to my trunk. “And where am I to keep my things if I’m to be without proper lodgings?”

Captain Sharpe smiles at me, and I am all too aware of how much he’s enjoying himself. “That’s a predicament for sure,” he muses. “Not many places on this ship that are safe from sticky fingers.”

I close my eyes and draw a calming breath. I am about to lose my temper, and I would absolutely hate to humiliate myself further. “Captain Sharpe . . . I have no desire to play this game with you. If you cannot accommodate me appropriately, or even provide me with a safe place for my things, I will find another ship.”

“Will you, lad?” the captain asks me, lifting one dark brow. “And how do you propose to do that? Will you swim back to port?”

My eyes widen and my stomach drops as I recall that when I dozed off, they were raising the anchor. How long did I sleep? How far out to sea have we come? I cannot think of anything to say in reply. All I can do is stare at Captain Sharpe with my mouth agape, blinking stupidly as the gravity of my situation truly sets in.

My expression seems to have some kind of effect on the captain, for he releases a puff of air and allows his shoulders to sag. “You can keep your trunk in here,” he says as he motions to where it currently sits. “You’ll have to come in here every day to do the ledgers anyway.”

Well, that’s something. I am surprised by the gesture, but I don’t say so. “Thank you, Captain.”

I decide it’s best to hedge my bets here. I have won a small victory, and now I’m sure I can press the captain later for a room. Surely, something can be found once he is feeling a little less hostile toward me.

I am about to leave when I recall the man who brought my trunk on board. I turn back to the captain, alarmed once more. “I was meant to pay my man for bringing my things on board.”

“He’s been paid.”

Shit. I sigh and reach into my pocket. “How much did he demand from you?”

Captain Sharpe smirks at me. “Two crowns. I told him he’d take three shillings or lose a hand.”

This startles a laugh out of me as I pull a crown from my purse. “Well. I had promised him a crown,” I say, tossing the coin to Captain Sharpe. “Consider the rest a small investment in the search for my room.”

It is the captain’s turn to laugh as he pockets my coin. “Off with you, lad. Get some sleep, for you’ll be up bright and early if you want to mess before I put you to work.”

I force a smile that I know must seem more like a grimace as I turn to leave the comforts of the captain’s lavish cabin. I cast one more mournful look toward my trunk, and then I step out on deck into the fading sun.

Hammocks are criminally unpleasant to sleep in. And the repulsive smell and chorus of snores and muttering do nothing to enhance the experience. I am at once resentful of Mr. Tydes and grateful to him. For while he did assign me to this small personal hell, he also allotted me the first hammock in the fo’c’sle, and there seems to be no one in the bunk below me.

After spending an eternity trying to sleep, I struggle out of my swinging death trap and land on the floor with a small crash and a few choice words. I hear snickering as I haul myself to my feet, but I pretend not to. Instead I hold my head high and make my escape, stepping back out on deck for a breath of fresh air.

“Yer a bit overdressed fer this vessel, lad,” a voice says from behind me.

I spin about, alarmed, and find myself face-to-face with a man who looks not much older than me. His eyes are blue and have a mischievous slant to them, giving him a faint fox-like quality.

“Am I? Shoot, I was sure I had packed the right jacket for the occasion.”

The man laughs, and I am pleasantly surprised to see that he has most of his teeth, with one golden one behind his right canine, and his face is quite gentle on the eyes. He has the sun-kissed tan skin of a man who was once fair but is now bronzed, and his hair is a shade of blond just brassy enough to have been red before the sun bleached the warmth from it. He wears only breeches and a shirt, his sleeves rolled up despite the chill in the evening air. “So, yer the new lad.”

“Guilty as charged.”

He grins, and I daresay that glint of gold is alarmingly dashing. I find myself smiling with him.

“Dinnae see many lads like *you* on a ship like this,” he points out rather unnecessarily, his upper lip curling into something like a sneer.

I shrug. “I imagine I’m not so terribly different from you, outside of my station at birth giving me a few more advantages.”

“Bein’ born inta wealth makes ye plenty different,” he corrects sharply. Fair enough—but he doesn’t tell me off, so I suppose I haven’t offended him too badly with my feeble attempt at relating to him. “Name’s Renard.”

He offers his hand, so I reach out to shake it, trying to keep my handshake firm like I’ve seen my father do. “Kit.”

“Kit?” he repeats with a note of incredulity.

“It’s short for Christopher,” I elucidate, not bothering to explain that my full first name is, in fact, two names . . . because apparently my father couldn’t pick only one. “Kit suits me better.”

Renard lifts a brow and looks me over, still holding on to my hand. “Sure ’bout that? Ye seem a bit . . . fussy.”

“Thanks,” I grunt.

“How’d ye end up on this old boat, *Kit*?”

I tug my hand free, which is a little awkward. “I’m wanted for murder,” I say with an air of casual dismissal as I turn to lean against the port rail so I might watch the last colors of the sunset.

Renard joins me, staring at me rather than the beautiful view as he leans one elbow on the rail. “That so? Then ye’ll fit right in weth the crew of the *Deliverance*.”

I can only assume he’s joking, so I laugh—but I have nothing clever to say in response.

“But really, what’s got yer prissy britches on *this* ship in particular?”

My *what*?

“Ah, well”—I gesture vaguely to where I assume the port was some hours ago—“it required the least amount of walking down the dock.”

Renard’s expression shifts from indulgent to something I can’t quite place. He stares at me, dumbfounded, and squints his glittering blue eyes in disbelief. “Ye . . .” Suddenly he bursts into laughter—this time a full belly laugh, like he cannot help himself. “Ye didn’t consider the ship at all? Just . . . picked the nearest one?”

“A ship is a ship,” I confirm with a little grin. “I was tired of walking. If there hadn’t been space for me, I suppose I would have continued on to the next one.”

“Why . . .” He stops himself, considering his next words. “All right, fair ’nough. I’ll accept that. Ye look ridiculous ’nough ta be tellin’ the truth.”

A little rude, but all right.

“An’ what made a foppish lad like yerself board a ship ta begin weth?”

“I told you,” I say in earnest. “I’m wanted for murder.” I allow my eyes to narrow a little as I smile mischievously back at him. Who doesn’t enjoy a little harmless flirting?

“Ah, aye.” He nods sarcastically. “Ye seem like a cold-blooded killer indeed. I can see it in those dead eyes of yers.”

He doesn’t believe me, but I won’t let up. I’m enjoying my ridiculous lie and the way his eyes crinkle when he laughs. “It’s true, I just have that look about me,” I agree. “I am an absolute menace to society.”

“Now, that I actually *do* believe,” he says.

“That’s rude! I’m a gentleman. Gentlemen don’t lie.”

“Just murder people in cold blood?” This makes me laugh, and he pats me on the back. “Best get back ta bed, lad. It’ll be too dark fer ye ta fumble ’bout on deck soon, an’ no’ everyone on board is as gentlemanly as I am.”

I try not to think too hard about what he’s insinuating as I give an exasperated sigh and stand upright once more. I don’t want to go back to the hammock below, but I suppose I ought to avoid falling overboard, since I cannot swim. “Right.”

“I’ll look out fer ye tomorrow mornin’ in the mess,” he adds. “I’ll introduce ye ta the other officers.”

“Other officers?” I ask, giving him another once-over.

“Oh, aye. Boatswain,” he says, motioning to himself.

My blank expression earns a glare that is really more of a pout than anything.

“I’m in charge of the crew. Which means ye answer ta me first, an’ Cap’n second. Come now, lad—ye can’t have truly joined a ship’s crew havin’ nae idea how it all works.”

“Oh, I assure you I can have,” I counter, ignoring his suggestion that I should answer to anyone other than myself. “I am particularly talented in making dubious life decisions.”

“What a delightful mess y’are,” Renard says with a snort. “Get ta sleep. I’ll do my best ta educate ye in the mornin’, so ye dinnae go round lookin’ like a *complete* fool.”

“Only a partial one?”

“Indeed.”

“Much appreciated.” I smile at Renard and bow my head. “Good night, Renard.”

“G’night, lad.”

He steps away from me, and I don’t watch where he is headed. Instead I fortify myself with one last deep gulp of fresh air before plunging back into the hellish confines of the fo’c’sle. My frayed, filthy hammock awaits.

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I wake to the sound of footsteps and loud voices around me—which means I have somehow slept. My neck is stiff, and the muscles of my back and shoulders complain as I struggle out of my hammock as gracefully as I can manage. I am not used to sleeping in my clothes, and the wrinkled state of them annoys me. Still, wearing nothing but a nightshirt in a room full of strange and rough men feels unwise. They have mostly ignored me thus far, but I would rather not draw unwanted attention to myself.

I was the only one still abed, made evident by the rows of empty hammocks. Only a few men remain, sitting upright in their hammocks or on the floor, chatting among themselves with plates of food balanced in their laps. My stomach gives an unhappy whine as I attempt to smooth out my shirt and trousers. But my efforts are in vain, and with a sigh I heed my stomach and turn to find my way to the mess for something to eat.

It is offensively early. I haven’t a pocket watch to tell the time, but I know by how irritable I am that I should not be awake yet. I try not to think about how much I am regretting my spontaneous and rather dramatic departure from home, impending nuptials or no.

I get turned around twice in the unfamiliar hallways and rickety, steep staircases of the ship before finding one of the young men I first glimpsed on deck yesterday morning.

“You there!” I call to him, then mentally scold myself. If I am a member of the crew, I ought to be speaking to these men as my peers. But how does one address a person whose name you do not know? There must be some trick to it. People like me are forced to endure formal introductions and the listing of titles when we first meet, but I am quite sure regular men do no such thing.

The lad turns and I realize he must be very close to my own age, or perhaps even younger—it is so hard to tell with these sailors. His eyes widen a little, his thick, ruddy brows rising as if he is shocked to be addressed by me. I smile and approach him. “Yes,” I assure him. “You. Forgive me, we haven’t been formally introduced. My name is Kit—I wonder if you might point me in the direction of breakfast?”

“Yer that fancy man we saw on deck yesterday,” he replies, eyeing me with cautious curiosity. “Heard you’d joined the crew. Trev ’n’ I got bets on whether yer a runaway er not.”

Charming. I have no clue who Trev is, and I don’t ask. “Ah, very entertaining. Forgive me, I am quite famished.”

“Sorry,” the lad says, dipping his head in a way that tells me he is either shy or lacking in confidence. I almost feel bad for avoiding conversation with him, but I haven’t eaten since the stolen pastry yesterday morning, and now that my stomach is no longer in knots, it is crying out for sustenance. “Breakfast is over by now, most like, but I’ll bring ye to the galley ’n’ ask the cook to muster up something for ye. If he’s in a good mood, he might.”

Shit. How early do these men eat? I groan and rub my face. “If . . . you could just point me in that direction, I am sure I can manage on my own. No need to trouble yourself . . . um . . .” I hold a hand out to him inquisitively, and he stares blankly back at me. “Your name?”

He laughs and taps himself on the forehead, which I suppose is kind of cute. “Right, sorry. Name’s Tristan.”

“Tristan. Charmed,” I say with as pleasant a smile as I can muster at ass o’clock in the morning with no food in my belly.

“The men mess in the fo’c’sle; only officers eat in the salon. Yer new, though, so maybe Cook’ll take pity on ye. The galley’s direct below the cap’n’s quarters.”

“Forgive me, Tristan . . . I haven’t a clue where I am right *now*, let alone where the captain’s cabin is.”

Tristan laughs again and takes my hand in an alarmingly familiar way. I don’t argue. I’d rather the crew like me, and he seems harmless.

Plus, I truly am famished.

I allow him to guide me through the twists and turns of the ship, too impressed by how well he has memorized this dark maze to remember any of it myself. I think we must be nearing the galley, for I can smell the lingering olfactory remains of breakfast, and my stomach whines again. Tristan either doesn’t hear or chooses to ignore it. My dignity appreciates his discretion either way.

“There y’are!” I hear a familiar voice say. Tristan goes rigid, and I turn to see Renard just behind us. “Ye missed breakfast.”

I pout at him as Tristan releases my hand and bows his head in some show of respect. Or maybe he’s just afraid of him? I recall now that Renard is the officer in charge of the crew, whatever that means. Am I meant to show him some kind of deference?

I’m too hungry to bother. “I see that,” I say with a sigh. “I am not used to waking so early.”

“It’s no’ that early,” Renard counters, and I could swear he rolls his eyes at me. “But I saved ye a plate. C’mon. *Tristan* is s’posed ta be doin’ stock.”

Tristan makes a startled sound that is somehow adorable, in the way that a puppy is adorable. He scurries off, and I follow Renard into the galley, where a handful of men are busy cleaning the pots from breakfast. I stand in the doorway as Renard speaks to a man who must be the cook, then takes a

plate from him. They laugh together before Renard comes my way and takes my shoulder, spinning me about and leading me from the galley.

“I’ll letcha eat in the salon, nae one’s in there now.”

“I appreciate that,” I say, though in truth I am annoyed I haven’t a proper place to dine. I make a note to complain to Captain Sharpe about my abysmal accommodations so far.

Renard leads me into the salon, which is naught but a small room with two tables and various bags of produce hanging from the ceiling, along with a large cabinet that I suspect houses some sort of liquor meant only for the officers. I take a seat, and Renard sets my plate down and sits across from me. “Enjoy it, lad. In a few days we’ll be eatin’ hardtack an’ dried meat.”

It is an immense effort to keep from wrinkling my nose at the plate before me. It must be some kind of fish, along with a potato and an apple. It’s a strange combination, but I am too hungry to refuse it, so I start on the fish first, deciding to use the apple as a palate cleanser at the end of my meal.

“Thank you for saving this for me,” I say once I’ve eaten a few bites and my thoughts become marginally less jumbled. The fish isn’t too terrible. It’s cold, and seasoned with things I can’t identify, which are almost pleasant. The potato is also cold, but soft enough to cut into with my fork, though it ends up a bit smashed in the process.

Apparently, it is very amusing to watch me eat, for Renard snorts and sits back with his arms crossed. “Never eaten weth yer hands b’fore?”

“Why would I do something like that?” I ask, aghast.

“Why, indeed,” Renard mutters. “Yer gonna have ta start gettin’ yerself up in the mornin’ if ye wanna eat. I cannae be savin’ ye meals every day.”

“Mm. So, what does it mean that you are in charge of the crew?” I ask. I hate being scolded or told what to do. I’d much rather change the subject.

“I assign the men their work, make sure the decks’re kept clean, an’ unofficially let the men take their grievances ta me so I can handle ’em wethout causin’ a ruckus.”

“What sort of grievances?”

Renard shrugs. “Anythin’ really. Arguments amongst ’emselves, complaints against other officers er the distribution of rations. Squabbles ’bout workload an’ the like. Mostly, I keep ’em busy weth work, so they will nae cause me any trouble.”

“Rather like a governess, it seems,” I point out after swallowing a bite of potato. Renard grunts, and I cannot help but smile at his annoyance. He doesn’t like the comparison—I can tell by the way his brow twitches. “I’ll do my best to wake early enough in the morning.”

“See that ye do. An’ dinnae go causin’ problems fer me. I will nae have ye stirrin’ up trouble on my ship. Try ta make friends weth the crew where ye can,” he says. “If they like ye, they’ll look out fer ye. Tristan an’ Trevor are a good start. They’re bairns, but they fit in well weth the crew, an’ nae one’s got complaints ’bout ’em.”

“Yes, I thought Tristan seemed quite young.”

“Six an’ ten, both of ’em. But they’ve been on the *Deliverance* since they were wee.”

“And you?”

“Four years at sea. Pressed at eighteen, joined the *Deliverance* a year later.”

Pressed at eighteen. I try not to think about the fact that my own eighteenth birthday is mere months away. I can’t imagine being pressed into service and forced to live at sea. Nor do I want to be on board this ship for the next four years of my life. I am realizing now how absurd I was to come aboard in the first place. A lump forms in my throat and I sit back, looking around for something to drink.

Renard must read my mind, for he stands and goes to the cabinet on the far wall. Moments later he returns with a mug of ale for me. It is too early to be drinking ale, even for me . . . but I take the mug anyway and down half the liquid inside. This must be for the officers. It could be better, but I can stomach it, at least.

“Thank you,” I manage when the lump in my throat has settled firmly into my belly once more. What on earth am I doing here? I have no plan. I don’t even know where this ship is going, much less what I am going to do when we get there. What if we sail to the colonies? Did I pack enough brown to live among Puritans? Do I even *want* to live among Puritans? Oh God, what have I *done*?

“Ye all right there, lad?”

I clear my throat and take another generous sip of the ale. “Indeed,” I reply. “Some fish caught in my throat. What made you decide to join this crew?”

“Rather’n stay weth the navy?” Renard asks, lifting a brow as if the answer ought to be obvious.

“Allow me to rephrase . . . What made you decide to *stay* with this crew?”

He considers, watching me with a frown. “Nae man chooses this life, lad,” he says. I wonder about the truth of that, but I don’t argue with him. “Ye stay ’cause ye need the money. If yer lucky, ye find a good hidin’ spot an’ squirrel away ’nough ta start a new life.”

“Is that your plan?” I ask, curious.

“Ye ask a lot of questions, lad,” he points out, narrowing his eyes at me.

I raise my brows at him and sit back. “I’ll endeavor to ask significantly less questions in the future.”

We stare at each other for an eternity or two, me pouting as if I might burst with the need to speak, before he rolls his eyes and holds up his hands in defeat. “Spit it out already.”

I offer him a charming smile in appreciation. “What can you tell me about Captain Sharpe?”

“What d’ye wanna ken?”

I consider and shrug. “His accent is unfamiliar to me.”

“Ever been ta the West Indies?” I shake my head and he gives a slow, knowing nod. “Cap’n was born there. Jamaica er Barbados, cannae be

sure.”

“How old is he?”

Renard squints and rubs his jaw. “Nae more’n a year older’n myself, I’d wager. Three an’ twenty at the oldest.”

Christ. He seems so much more worldly than a man barely past his majority. “I thought he was older.”

“Did ye?”

I can’t be imagining the strange tone in Renard’s voice. I narrow my eyes at him and offer a quizzical expression. “Perhaps not *much* older.” I finish the ale and stand, snatching the apple off my plate. “Thank you for breakfast, and for the conversation. I ought to find my way to the captain’s cabin so I can start . . . *work*.” Oh, that word tastes simply awful in my mouth. I grimace and bite into the apple.

It’s tart and crisp and absolutely perfect.

“C’mon, I’ll show ye the way,” Renard says as he gets to his feet.

I follow him from the salon, chewing another bite of apple to drown out the panicked thoughts coursing through my mind and the sensation of dread settling over my innards.

“You can use my desk for today, but don’t go poking around in the drawers,” Captain Sharpe says as he drops a stack of books and papers onto the now-cleared wooden top of his desk.

I stare at the books dubiously. “What am I meant to do with these?”

“Read them. Make sense of them. Starting today, your job is to record whatever I tell you to record.”

“And why must I go through these instead of just starting a fresh page?”

“Because I told you to.”

I roll my eyes and look at Captain Sharpe. “Captain—”

“I’m going to stop you before you say something . . .” Sharpe hesitates as he considers his words. Eventually he settles on a polite, “Ill-advised.” Then he eyes me. “You do as I say, for no other reason than because I say it. That’s how it works on this ship. I am in charge. Trust that if I assign you work, there is a reason. You don’t need to know that reason.”

I sigh as dramatically as I can and flop into his chair like a petulant child. I am feeling quite petulant, and my nerves are still on edge. “I understand, but I would very much appreciate some kind of explanation, so I am not going in blind. What am I looking for?”

“I want you to be familiar with these books so you understand your role.”

“Can you not just . . . summarize them for me?”

“I don’t read the ledger,” Sharpe says as he makes his way over to the settee and sinks into it with a sigh. “That’s your job.”

Annoying.

I wrinkle my nose and stare at the chaotic pile before me. With another sigh, just because I want Sharpe to know *exactly* how annoyed I am, I begin to sort the books and papers into two neat stacks. “This is going to take days,” I complain.

“Good. It’ll keep you quiet and busy.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“I expect you to be caught up by the end of the week.”

“Prepare to be disappointed, then,” I mumble as I open the first book. I can see him turn toward me in my peripheral vision, and I am quite sure he is attempting to intimidate me with his stare. However, he doesn’t know I am an expert at ignoring intimidating stares. And he’s far too handsome to instill the same terror my father manages when he gives me that same look.

He gives in when I don’t raise my head, and after a while I hear him stand. I do look up then, just in time to watch him leave the cabin without a second glance my way.

That’s fine—I hate having people linger when I am reading. It makes my skin itch. I return my attention to the log before me and sigh, for real this time. I thought reading Thomas More’s *Utopia* was boring, but this is impressively dull.

Still, it is a somewhat welcome distraction from my looming anxiety. I slowly work my way from page to page and begin to understand the purpose of these ledgers.

Each day there is a succinct summary of the happenings on board. Once every week there is a detailed log of the food and drink on board. Every few weeks there is a renewal of food and drink, and a log of items such as cloth, coin, sometimes jewels, or even livestock. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to the things bought at port, and sometimes a port is not even listed, a ship noted down instead. I suppose it’s not unusual for ships to trade with each other while at sea, but it never occurred to me before.

By the time I finish the first ledger and move on to the second, I have entirely forgotten my feelings of remorse. I must admit I am comforted by how easy the job of scribe seems to be, enough that I may not even mind this assignment Captain Sharpe has bestowed upon me. I have a good head for numbers and a neat enough hand. I still need to decide what to do and where to go, but for now I can manage this small task.

I am halfway through the second ledger when a hand on my shoulder sends my soul catapulting into the ether. I spin around to stare up at Captain Sharpe’s silhouette against the stained-glass door. “Christ!”

“No, lad. Just me.”

I laugh, but my heart is still running at full speed, and I am not sure I can catch up with it while sitting, so I pull myself to my feet. My body complains, and a groan slips out before I can stop it. “Damnation . . . how long have I been sitting here?”

Sharpe chuckles and leans over the desk to stare at the ledger. “I admit, I expected to come in here and find you rifling around in my things or drinking my wine—”

“You’ve wine?”

“But it looks like you’re actually capable of doing what you’re told.”

Well, that’s annoying. I am suddenly far less determined to do my job than I was before. What is it about being told what to do that makes you absolutely *not* want to do it?

“Your belongings are of no interest to me, Captain,” I say. “I have no need for shark teeth and compasses.”

I make my way over to my trunk, realizing that an entire day has now gone by, and I am still in my wrinkled clothes from the day before. I kneel to open it and rifle through to find something clean to wear.

As I pull out a pair of fetching green trousers, I am suddenly reminded of how terribly I slept. I stand and turn to watch Captain Sharpe as he carefully stacks the ledgers and slides them into a drawer in his desk.

“I’d like to speak with you about my accommodations on board.”

“I’m sure you would.”

Oh, not this again. “Captain, I really must insist—”

“You sleep with the crew, and that’s final,” he says, sinking into the chair at his desk. “I’m not in the habit of making special arrangements for anyone, and the crew won’t like you better if you’re given special treatment.”

I hate that I know he’s right. I must be sulking, because he’s smiling at me like I’ve done something very entertaining. It’s irritating that he finds my suffering so very amusing. It’s even more irritating that I am still charmed by him.

“I’ll wear you down until you find me better lodgings,” I vow.

He laughs—a great, explosive sort of laugh that sends a warm wave through me. “You are welcome to try, Kitten,” he says.

I am determined *not* to think about the shiver that nickname elicits. Is this going to stick? I can’t tell whether I hate it or love it . . . but I’m not given much time to decide before he speaks again.

“Go on and get some dinner in your belly. In the morning I will dictate today’s log to you.”

As if on command, my stomach grumbles. My cheeks heat, but aside from a little smile on Captain Sharpe's face, he does not react.

"I . . . am not sure how to get to the galley," I admit reluctantly.

"Ask one of the men to lead you—they'll be heading down themselves to eat," Sharpe says as he uses the candle on his desk to light a few others behind him. "Then go to bed so you'll wake up in time for breakfast."

I won't ask how he knows I missed breakfast. I suppose the captain should always know what's happening on his ship, but I still don't like that someone tattled on me for sleeping in. "Tomorrow I'd like to discuss my accommodations further."

"I look forward to avoiding that very conversation," Sharpe says as he turns to face me once more. "Good night, Kitten."

That damned nickname! I can't even scowl because of it. Instead I pout and take my change of clothes with me as I leave his cabin, both defeated and enamored at the same time.

"How was yer first day as a workin' man?" Renard asks me an hour later as we sit together under the darkening sky, our dinner plates in our laps.

I almost snort, but I haven't yet become quite that low class. "It's simply awful," I whine as I sip the swill in my mug. I gag and set the mug aside. I'm not sure I'm desperate enough to ingest another sip of it.

"Poor wee noble," Renard says, clearly sympathetic by the absolute lack of sincerity in his voice.

I laugh and lean back against the rail of the ship. Renard has decided to sit atop the rail, but even seeing him up there makes my insides tremble with anxiety. I am safer down here on the floor. "I spent all day reading the old ledgers and can't make sense of half the sums in them. I wonder if the last scribe had a firm grasp of his numbers." Renard's body goes stiff beside me, so I do finally shift myself to look up at him.

He is frowning down at me with his plate in one hand and ale in the other. He glances around and then slides off the rail to take a seat beside me on the deck. “Ye mean Jeff, the accountant?” he asks.

“Jeff?” I reply, incredulous. I have never heard a name like that one before.

“Jeffrey Reuter,” Renard says, and I cannot place the unusual quality in his voice. He isn’t quite whispering, but there is a conspiratorial tone to his words that immediately puts me on edge.

“Ah, yes . . . I believe Reuter was the name at the bottom of each page. I confess I mostly skipped over that bit.” I frown at Renard. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“Ah . . . it’s nothin’, lad. I wouldn’t worry that pretty wee head of yers ’bout it.”

Now he really has my attention. My entire plate is set aside, and I lean forward to stare at Renard. “No,” I insist. “Tell me.”

Renard stares at me with a serious frown on his face, and I cannot tell whether he’s assessing how well I can handle what he’s about to say or whether he’s upset by the memory he’s conjuring. “He disappeared some months back.”

“He what?”

“Oh aye,” Renard continues. “We made a stop at Port Royal. ’Twas meant ta be a single day—the men dinnae even get off the ship. Few officers an’ the cap’n left ta do some business. Jeff’s job was ta handle the finances, an’ that meant he ordered wha’ever rations we needed as well. Only, well after sunset the rations’d yet ta be delivered. The cap’n went lookin’ fer Jeff, as we’d meant ta leave on the dawn’s tide. Only Jeff was gone. Everythin’ was left in his bunk—he was just gone.”

A cold chill prickles down my spine, and I know for sure I won’t be able to eat a bite of my dinner now. “What happened to him?”

Renard shrugs and sits back to take a long sip of his ale. He wipes his upper lip on the back of his hand and shakes his head. “Dinnae ken. Never

saw him again. No’ a trace left behind.”

“And no explanation at all?”

Renard shakes his head once more. “Nothin’. He up an’ vanished wethout a word. The men thought he may have been tempted by a siren’s song. One of ’em claimed ta see Jeff walk straight off the poop deck an’ drop inta the ocean below.” He pauses to look at me, as if trying to judge whether he is terrifying me sufficiently.

He is.

“Another said Jeff’s ghost appeared ta him in his sleep the night b’fore. Either way, ’twas a nasty business. Cap’n spent three days lookin’ fer him, an’ fin’lly gave up when we couldn’t stay at port any longer wethout rousin’ suspicion.”

I am suddenly reminded of how Captain Sharpe hesitated when he told me the previous scribe had “left.” I feel sick. I need water, but all I have is this mediocre ale. I need air, but the salt on the wind is suffocating me. I swallow nothing and bring the ale to my lips to wet my tongue. “I think I should get to bed . . . ,” I say.

Renard lifts a brow. “Ye ought ta toss them books an’ start a new ledger. Jeff’s books’re cursed.”

Cursed.

His words are like a punch to the gut. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I can hear the familiar sound of my father’s voice whispering about curses. About *my* curse. About how it might be catching. The chill returns, and it is all I can do not to shiver as it courses once more down my spine.

“Don’t be absurd,” I say, though there is little strength behind my words.

“Dinnae believe in curses?” Renard asks.

“Of course not,” I lie—because admitting to believing in curses is admitting that my father is right.

He stares down at me, brows raised, and all I can do is clamp my mouth shut and stare back at him. I suppose we will keep this up until one of us

speaks, or we both just die.

It is I who finally breaks the silence. “Why would the ledgers be cursed just because Jeff abandoned the ship?” There. That’s a logical question!

“Everythin’ he touched is cursed,” Renard explains, unbothered by my attempt at discrediting him. “An’ he dinnae just abandon the ship, lad. Nae, he vanished on the wind. Somethin’ evil swallowed him up. The man who took his blanket broke out in a rash all over his body. I went through his things an’ had hellish nightmares fer weeks. The books he kept in his hammock burst inta flame out of naewhere. Ye best believe the ledgers he wrote in’re just as cursed as everythin’ else. The men wanted ’em burned, but Cap’n would nae have it.”

I want to say that I don’t believe him. I want to roll my eyes and accuse him of trying to scare me. But there is something in Renard’s eyes that gives me pause, and the echo of my father’s voice lingers and twists my insides. I pull myself to my feet, leaving my dinner behind for Renard to eat, if he has the stomach for it.

“I have to get to bed,” I say again, my voice barely a whisper.

I exhale slowly because I don’t want to retch. After a moment I am strong enough to stagger toward the stairs. I’m not sure how I make it to the fo’c’sle, but somehow the next thing I know, I am climbing into my hammock and using my change of clothes as a pillow, yanking my ratty blanket up over my head.

Whatever sense of relief I felt this morning has vanished. I squeeze my eyes shut and hope to sleep without dreaming of the scribe who came before me—or the curse he left behind.

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Six

If there is a curse on these ledgers, it doesn't seem to be catching. In truth, the only curse I have found in them is the appalling arithmetic. The further I wade into the ledgers, the worse it seems to get. I give up trying to sort it all out and start a new ledger of my own. I'm really quite proud of it; it is tidy and organized in a way I never thought I could be. Even Captain Sharpe has commented on how appealing it is to look at.

If only my father could see me now.

It's been a matter of days—yes, I gave up on the old ledgers rather quickly—and I already feel like a new man. I have taken up residence on Captain Sharpe's settee during the day, my ledger spread out on the table before me as I hunch over it. I still like to glance at the old ones every now and again, to make sure I am writing down all that needs writing. Something about the way Captain Sharpe speaks to me, like I have *potential*, makes me *want* to do well. I find myself wanting to impress him.

A knock on the door makes me glance up.

Captain Sharpe grumbles something without looking away from his map, and Mr. Tydes and the quartermaster, Billy, let themselves into the room. Billy's a sweet-mannered chap with a low, humming voice perfect for

storytelling. He keeps his beard trim and his tightly curled hair shaved close to his head. His skin is a deep, rich brown, deeper than my own. Deeper still than Captain Sharpe's.

I like Billy a great deal. Something about him is calming, like a quiet embrace. He is a tall man, with broad shoulders and hands that could easily break me in half, had he a taste for violence. Yet I have watched him handle the mouser's newborn kittens with a pure gentleness that makes my chest ache.

Other than Renard and the twins—Tristan and Trevor—Billy has been the first of the men to befriend me.

Mr. Tydes gives me a once-over and narrows his eyes. "Out."

"I beg your—"

"Thank you, Kitten. You can go," Captain Sharpe says—and I can't help but blush.

I get to my feet and motion to the ledgers. "Am I not meant to—"

"Out," Mr. Tydes says once more, without even looking at me.

I shoot them all an exasperated look, but the only one paying me any mind is Billy, who offers a sympathetic smile. I sigh and drop my ledger loudly onto the table before rounding the settee. I hook my finger under my jacket, which is draped across the back, and pull it on, stumbling slightly as the ship shifts. Goddamned rickety old piece of shit. My dramatic exit now ruined, I huff and leave the cabin, closing the door behind me with as much force as I dare without breaking the stunning stained glass—for *that* would be a crime.

I hear laughter inside, which only infuriates me further. Caught up as I am in my own wounded pride, I have no time to brace for impact as I collide with someone's warm, damp back, then topple and land flat on my ass on the unforgiving deck boards.

"Watch where you're going, princeling," the sweaty shadow barks at me.

I am gagging at the feeling of his sweat on my jaw when I register what he's said to me. I get to my feet, and though my first instinct is to reprimand him for speaking disrespectfully to his better, I recall myself just in time to save my face the travesty of a deserved black eye as I peer up at the man before me.

I've seen him before—he's a few bunks away from me down in the fo'c'sle. Rodriguez, I believe they call him. Despite the chill in the air, his shirt is soaked through with sweat, likely due to the hundred-stone coil of rope over his arm. His hair is on the longer side, falling in waves around his ears and neck. He has a trim beard and a complexion that is somewhat more olive than brown.

It is the shocking color of his eyes that strikes me, though. I never noticed before, having never been up close to him, but they are the most engaging shade of grey blue. I've never seen a man of color with eyes that shade. I cannot help staring, though I know this is a grave error.

"The hell're you staring at, princeling?"

Rodriguez drops the rope and grabs the front of my jacket, hauling me up onto my toes. I've never been roughed around like this before. I am genuinely shocked as my heels leave the deck, and I grasp at his wrist with both hands. "Sir!" I exclaim, more indignant than afraid.

He blinks. "Sir," he repeats, then drops me and starts to laugh.

Is he laughing at me or the situation? I can't tell. I glance around for assistance, but half the men on deck are ignoring us entirely, and the other half look disappointed that I am still in one piece.

I decide to roll with it and make a show of dusting off and smoothing out my jacket. "This is *Italian* silk!"

He laughs harder. And fine, let him laugh, so long as my face survives this interaction. "Forgive me, Your Highness," he grunts through his laughter, and I detect more than a hint of malicious intent behind his words.

"I'm not a prince," I insist—which is a stupid thing to say. He clearly *knows* I'm not a prince.

“Ah, then forgive me,” he says again, bowing, to the amusement of the ten or so men who’ve gathered around us, “lordling.”

I roll my eyes. “If you’re going to insult me, you could at least get my title correct.”

“Oh?” he asks, stepping closer, so that I am forced to step back. “And what title would that be?”

Shit. I clear my throat and give a humiliating, pitchy sort of laugh.

“Rodriguez, get back ta work!” Renard calls from somewhere in the crowd. The men part to let him through, and I could *kiss* him—but that reaction seems even more likely to get me a black eye. So I remain where I am and let him come to my rescue. The glare Rodriguez shoots at Renard before reluctantly returning to his task is alarmingly hostile. He may have given me a hard time, but at least he’s never looked at me with so much vitriol.

Renard rounds on me with a frown. “Kit, where’re ye s’posed ta be?” he asks.

“I beg your—”

“Where?” he demands—and as the men begin to clear the area to get back to their assigned tasks, I think he must be having a go at me.

I frown and shrug, and then he’s got me by the arm and is dragging me toward the stairs over Captain Sharpe’s cabin door. I’m too startled to say anything. In all my years of living, I’ve never been touched so freely and frequently as I have today. Renard spins me around and pushes me against the railing. “Keep yer head down,” he says. “What’re ye wearin’ those fancy britches fer?”

I blink at him. “I beg—these are simply my *clothes*.”

“Oh, aye, I’ve noticed. If ye want the men ta like ye, stop bein’ such a priss.”

“A what?”

“I dinnae ken what yer fancy title is off this ship, but as long as yer on my crew, yer the same as every man here.”

I sigh and nod. “I understand.”

“Do ye?”

Well.

“Kit.”

“Yes,” I sigh. “I didn’t start anything, I was merely—”

“Causin’ trouble. Keep yer head down an’ check yer pride.”

I see his point, and though I am pouting, I can’t disagree with him. I cross my arms and give another dramatic little sigh. “I’m trying.”

“Try. Harder,” Renard growls through gritted teeth. I hate the way he reminds me of my father in this moment.

“Why are you picking on *me*?” I ask. “*He’s* the one who got all handsy!”

Renard blows out a puff of air in a sigh that feels a tad dramatic, even to me, and rolls his eyes. “I’m no’ pickin’ on ye, lad. I’m givin’ ye advice. I suggest ye take it, b’fore ye wind up bloodied er thrown overboard.”

I freeze. I never considered I might piss someone off enough to be *thrown overboard*. That seems unfathomably cruel to me. “Would they *do* that?”

“Oh, aye.”

Whether he’s bluffing or not, I’m scared shitless now. I glance over the rail into the fathomless, rippling tide and audibly swallow down whatever’s left of my pride. “I’ll keep my head down.”

“That’s a good lad. Now get back ta work.”

“The captain kicked me out of his cabin for a meeting.”

Renard snorts at that and glances down to the stained-glass door. “Then stay by the door an’ wait till he calls ye back in. An’ gain his trust if ye dinnae wanna be kicked out every time Tydes goes in fer a chat.”

“How am I to do that, exactly?”

“Do somethin’ ’bout yer . . .” He waves a hand at me vaguely. “This.”

“What? What is ‘this’?” I ask, glancing down at myself, then lift my gaze to his once more. “You mean *me*?”

“Aye,” Renard confirms with a sharp laugh. “Do somethin’ ’bout that.”

I understand now the urge to throttle another man for insulting you. “How d—”

“Kitten!”

I jump and turn to look down at Captain Sharpe where he stands in the open door, staring at me. “Y-yes, Captain?” I ask, flustered at the interruption and his public use of that absurd little nickname.

I’m sure I don’t imagine the way Captain Sharpe’s eyes narrow when he looks at Renard as the man scurries off. The captain doesn’t answer me, just turns to go back inside his cabin, leaving the door open. I duck my head and move unsteadily down the stairs, gripping the rail just a bit harder than necessary, before following him through the open door.

I squint as my eyes adjust to the dim light, closing the door behind me. “Am I to have my work disrupted every time Mr. Tydes comes in for a chat?” I ask.

He turns to me, brows raised. “Want to try that again?”

I blink back at him. “Did I stutter?”

He is silent for a moment, before he blows out a puff of air and chuckles. “You’ve got a mouth on you, but you haven’t the claws to back it up. Get back to your ledgers, Kitten. And stop causing a ruckus on my ship.”

“I’m not causing a ruckus,” I say as I move back over to the settee.

“You *are* a ruckus.”

I smile a little as I take my seat and lift the ledger to find where I left off. Well, he’s not wrong there.

I never realized how *exhausting* work can be. By the time I return to my hammock, I am sore and irritable from bending over my ledgers all morning and afternoon. I slide out of my jacket and hang it carefully on the top hammock of my bunk. No one ever took the space below mine, so I have moved myself into the lower hammock—less risk of falling and breaking my nose—and taken to draping my clothes in the upper hammock to keep them fairly wrinkle-free.

I am working open my cravat when a bowl of something akin to stew appears before my eyes. I turn to see Tristan beaming as he holds it out to me. Trevor helps himself to a seat on my hammock, but I don't complain. I let my cravat slide free and drop it onto the upper hammock, then take the bowl with a wide smile.

"Thank you, Tristan."

Though they are twins, it's easy to tell Tristan and Trevor apart. They both have reddish-brown hair—Tristan's long, Trevor's cropped short—and sad puppy-dog eyes, but Trevor has been working very hard on growing a beard. (It's patchy but still commendable for a lad his age.) Tristan either prefers his face clean shaven, like me, or can't grow whiskers at all. It gives him a boyish charm that I find irresistibly endearing.

I daresay Tristan may very well be my favorite person on the crew—though it's early days yet and his adorable earnestness may prove to be more irritating than I anticipate. For now, however, I enjoy his company. And Trevor's as well, though he's a bit more standoffish.

"Yer welcome, Mr. Kit. I knew you'd forget to get dinner again."

I do rather like that he has taken to calling me Mr. Kit, instead of Mortimer, and encourages the crew to do the same. I'm surprised by the way it makes me feel somehow protective over him, which is silly because I am fairly certain Tristan could knock me on my ass in ten seconds flat, like every other man on this ship. But something about him feels so very tender. It's been barely a week, and yet with the twins, I feel like I've known them my entire life.

I’ve never had that before. I don’t really know what to do with it either, so I try not to think on it too much and just enjoy their company when I can.

“He doesn’t forget,” Trevor mumbles with his mouth full of bread. “He skips the line ’cause he knows you’ll bring him dinner.”

“That’s not true,” Tristan insists.

“I didn’t forget,” I say as I carefully move to sit beside Trevor without toppling the hammock. “I was just too tired to stand in line. I thought I could afford to skip a meal, but I am very pleased to not have to.”

“See?” Trevor gives a smug smile.

“Well, I don’t mind either way,” Tristan says.

“Ye goin’ to ask him?” Trevor prods, sopping up the last of his broth with his bread.

“Ask me what?” I interject after a swallow of stew.

“You wanted to know too!” Tristan protests.

“What’s going on?”

“Tristan wants to know if yer a prince.”

I laugh and look from one twin to the other—but neither of them is laughing with me. “What are you on about?”

“Someone said yer a runaway prince,” Tristan explains, his cheeks developing the most adorable shade of pink.

“I’m not a runaway prince,” I say, rolling my eyes and taking another bite of my stew. “I’m not even a member of the peerage. I’m just plain old Kit Mortimer.”

“Nothin’ about ye is plain,” Trevor teases, nudging my thigh with his own to point out the contrast of my trousers against his.

“You know what I meant.”

“Ye talk fancy,” Tristan adds. “Real posh.” He straightens his back and elongates his nose by pursing his lips when he says it.

I laugh and throw a chunk of bread his way. “Well, I’m not a prince. I’m just . . . educated.”

“Cap’n says yer real good with yer sums,” Tristan says.

My face grows hot. I am unused to compliments on things *other* than my appearance. And I rather like that the captain is speaking highly of me when I’m not even around to hear it. Though I wouldn’t mind if he spoke highly of me to my face more often too. “Ah, I’m . . . adequate with them. Nothing terribly impressive, I assure you.” I shift in the hammock and push a bit of stew around in my bowl.

“Better’n either of us,” Trevor says with a little grin that tells me he is unbothered by this.

“If yer done, I’ll take yer bowl back to the mess,” Tristan offers.

“Stop suckin’ up,” Trevor says.

“I’m bein’ *nice*!” Tristan argues as he takes my bowl from me. “But since yer bein’ a jerk, *you* can take ’em.” He stacks all the bowls onto Trevor’s lap and grins. “G’night.”

Trevor glares at his twin’s back as Tristan crosses the fo’c’sle to the bunk they share, but I am saved from any awkwardness when he stands up and nods a good night to me before obediently leaving to carry the stack of bowls to the mess.

I pull off my shoes and tuck them under my hammock before settling in for the night. My innards dip as the hammock sways with the swell of the ocean outside. Most nights, sleeping on the hammock feels a bit like floating. I watch in the dim light of the fo’c’sle as the walls around us rock but I remain somehow stationary.

Of course I understand the physics behind it. But it feels surreal anyway.

Tonight, however, my hammock wobbles with the shift of the ship. I can’t help but wonder if I am simply too awake or if something actually is different. The movements make it difficult, but eventually the hum of the men speaking softly, and the quiet rush of water against wood, lull me to sleep.

Until I am unceremoniously thrown from my hammock and land on the damp floor with a thud as the ringing in my ears fades into muffled screams from overhead.

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What is it about chaos and fear that inspires such poor decision-making? I know with certainty that I should stay below when I hear the crew screaming up on deck—but as I watch four or five men scramble up the stairs, somehow my instinct is to follow them.

I pull on my shoes and jacket as quickly as I can manage, leaving my cravat and waistcoat behind as I stumble from the room and directly into the far wall by the stairs. The ship groans in protest, and all at once I could vomit. I swallow back the urge and pull myself up the stairs as the ship is hauled back and forth.

I don't even make it halfway before I am soaked through, freezing rain hammering onto my body like tiny shards of ice. I gasp for air, as if I've just been thrown into the ocean.

I can barely see anything in the dark. A few torches seem to be surviving the onslaught of rain, and the intense reek of grog as I stumble past one is a hint as to why. I cling to whatever rigging I can find as I work my way away from the railing.

Despite having adjusted to the sway of the ship—developing my "sea legs," as Tristan puts it—I am not at all prepared for the sudden lurch of the

waves. I topple and roll inelegantly across the deck, slamming into the rail. For a moment, as the *Deliverance* teeters on her side, the world seems to slow to a crawl. I grab on to whatever I can find, holding on for dear life as my sodden clothes cling to my skin and my hair whips across my forehead, dropping salt water onto my lashes.

I fear this is the moment I will die, and the thought has me frozen with terror. I have also somehow lost a shoe, which is annoying. I rather like this pair of shoes, and they hadn't been cheap. Though I suppose that won't matter when my body is sinking down to Davy Jones's locker. The voices of the crew as they shout orders to one another are a distant buzz over the thrumming of rain and wind.

When I come back to myself, Renard is standing over me with one hand gripping the rigging. He is yelling at me—or rather, to me—but I can't make out his words. My heart is pounding too loudly in my ears, and the storm is drowning out whatever other sounds I might otherwise pick up.

"What?" I holler over the wind.

Instead of answering me, he hauls me to my feet by the front of my jacket and shoves me back toward the middle of the deck. I stumble, my balance thrown off by the lack of a shoe and the violence of the waves. When I finally get a firm grip on the mizzenmast rigging and turn back to look at Renard, he has already moved on to whatever task he'd been doing when he found me curled on the floor.

There I remain for what feels like an eternity but is likely only a few hours—or perhaps minutes. It's all a blur of screaming and ropes and salt in my eyes. Why did I come up here? What was I *thinking*?

To make matters even worse, as another wave sends the *Deliverance* tipping once more on her side, whatever remains of my stew dinner comes back up, and I am left shaking with tears in my eyes as I gasp to catch my breath. Now I am certain that I will die—and strangely, the face I most desire to see is not my father's, or Kitty's, but Captain Sharpe's. I want nothing more than to see him one last time. Somehow I know that if I can find him in the crowd, I will be safe.

The next few waves that crash down over the deck wash away both my pride and the vomit on my shirt. I retch once more, but it is naught but salt water.

And then I lift my head, and Billy is standing over me, untangling my limbs from the rigging and leaning his lips to my ear so he needn't scream in my face. "Hold on to me!"

I do. I hold on to him for dear life. He stumbles twice as he hauls me across the deck, toward the stained-glass door that promises shelter from the rain, if nothing else. At least I won't be hurled overboard—though the possibility of being tossed about in a room with a wall full of weapons is nothing to sneer at.

And being inside won't matter if the entire ship goes down.

"You're all right, Kit!"

There is more to what he says, but truly, I think I black out for a moment. The next thing I know, I am sprawled on the floor of Captain Sharpe's cabin, the door slamming behind me. The room is drenched in darkness, and the ship groans loudly as she does battle with Poseidon outside. I crawl on hands and knees across the floor and tuck myself under the large desk, praying the bolts securing it in place will hold true.

All I can think is that I'm not ready to die. I've hardly begun to live.

Hours later, when the *Deliverance* has finally tamed the waves, I see the faint glow of the blue hour outside the gallery windows reflected on the framed map behind Captain Sharpe's desk. I'm still hunched and shivering—still cold, and wet, and wearing only one shoe. My hair is stiff with salt.

I am pulled back to myself as the door to the cabin bursts open. I don't know whether I slept or merely sat here crying and shivering, but as I listen to the familiar fall of Captain Sharpe's boots on the wooden planks, I am all

too aware how ridiculous I am. My trunk, full of clean and dry clothes, is mere feet away . . . and yet here I sit, whimpering and wet under this desk.

I really am a coward.

The door to the cabin closes, and I think I should make myself known. A heavy rustle and the sound of metal clinking against the floor tells me Captain Sharpe is removing his jacket and belts. Oh God—I am about to humiliate myself further by bursting out from under his desk, wet and sniveling, while he undresses!

The shadow of booted feet appears in front of me, and he opens his top desk drawer, then rifles around inside. I should say something. I listen as he strikes his flint a few times, before the glow of candle flame slowly brightens the area around his desk. He's dripping all over the floor. I should *really* say something!

And then Captain Sharpe—in his shirtsleeves, locs loose and blackened by rainwater—drops to one knee. His white shirt is soaked through, clinging to his skin in a way that would have me hot and bothered if I weren't also cold and dripping with snot. For the first time I glimpse black marks that trail all the way up his arm and shoulder, marks that must be some kind of tattoo.

Fascinating.

He sighs as he stares at me and holds out his hand. "Come on, Kitten." Humiliated as I am, I don't hesitate. I take his hand and let him pull me out from under his desk. "What were you doing on deck?"

"I—"

He shakes his head to silence me. "Don't do that again. Unless you're called on deck, you stay below after curfew or during a commotion like that."

"Yes, Captain," I say—and it's a miracle I don't break down crying right there in front of him. Somehow he has managed to scold me without making me feel small. My father could learn something from him.

Captain Sharpe looks me over and smiles. “You’ve lost a shoe.” I sigh dramatically in response, and he steps toward his bed, peeling his shirt away from his skin. His tattooed arm is facing away from me. “Go on, Kitten. Get yourself some dry clothes and get back to your hammock to sleep.”

“Yes, Captain,” I say again. I slide out of my lone shoe and peel off my soaked jacket. It’s likely ruined now, but I can figure that out tomorrow. For now, I am desperate for my hammock, despite its foul odor. I grab a dry shirt, breeches, and smallclothes by feel, not worrying about what they look like. For the first time in my life, I find it hard to care about my appearance.

I avoid looking at Captain Sharpe as he undresses by his bed. The man I was at sunset would have stolen a glimpse and said something lewd. He would have invited himself to stay, then suggested a much more interesting activity than sleep.

I try not to think too hard about how changed I am from this storm as I push open the cabin door.

“Good night, Kitten,” says Captain Sharpe from somewhere behind me.

“Good morning, Captain,” I answer, closing the door once more. I proceed cautiously across the slick, wet deck of the *Deliverance* as she sways with the swell of the remaining waves. No one says a word to me as I make my way down into the fo’c’sle.

Billy is standing by the door, speaking softly to Mr. Tydes, when I pass by. He looks up at me and smiles, but mercifully he, too, says nothing. I am left to change into my dry clothes and crawl quietly into my hammock, my wet things abandoned in a heap on the floor.

My last thought as I succumb to sleep is of my engagement party, of a Christopher-Henry who thought that the worst thing about living at sea was the lack of personal hygiene.

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The next time I hear a commotion above deck is nearly a fortnight later. It may be the first time in my life I have done as I've been told, but I'd rather not risk another ordeal like the storm. I still wake in a cold sweat from nightmares of the sea sliding down my throat as I'm thrown from the deck and swallowed by black waves.

I have nothing else to do, so I stay in my hammock and doze fitfully between bouts intermittent yelling and the thunder of men running to and fro on the deck above.

Finally a hand on my shoulder jostles me awake, and I look up to see Trevor leaning over me. "Cap'n wants ye. Says ye got work to do."

I suck in a breath and sit up, struggling a bit as I fumble out of my hammock. "Damnation, what time is it?" Trevor shrugs, and I roll my eyes as I yank on my shoes. "Helpful."

"Not my fault ye slept in."

I wrinkle my nose, but he's right. I pull on my jacket and smooth it out. "What was that commotion earlier?"

Trevor grins at that. "A new shipment," he says. "Wait till ye see."

A shipment? I rub at my face and run my fingers through my hair. “Have we made port?” I ask, but Trevor is gone. With a sigh, I make my way up into the blinding afternoon sun. Once my eyes adjust, I am stunned to see that we are tethered to another ship, a smaller merchant vessel. There is no port nearby; we have apparently pulled up to trade on the water. I’d never heard of such a thing before seeing the strange trade listings in the old ledgers—but then, I do know very little of how ships and trade work.

Captain Sharpe hops down off the rail and passes by a stack of crates and casks, patting one with a grin on his face. I smile back at him—his glee is infectious. “What’s all this?” I ask.

“Get your ledger and quill, Kitten. I need you to log everything the men bring on board.”

I can’t help but steal a glance at his right arm, though his shirtsleeves right now are dry and opaque. “Is that all wine?”

“Port, and some beer,” he says, clearly pleased with himself. “We’ll have it bottled when we make landfall.”

Port. My mouth waters just at the thought of it. As I let myself into Captain Sharpe’s cabin to fetch the ledger and quill, I wonder how willing he would be to part ways with a few bottles.

I spend the rest of the afternoon logging every crate and cask on deck—spices, port, sugar, tobacco, beeswax. Tristan and Trevor organize the haul, and only when I have logged how many of each item there are do the crew move everything down into the hold. We’ve even gained two new men in the trade, which I’m not entirely clear on, but they seem pleased with their change of fortune. I wonder if they, like Renard, were also pressed into service.

The men are in great spirits. At some point after we cut the merchant vessel loose and part ways, I hear a roar of cheers and turn to see Captain Sharpe crack open the lid on one of the beer kegs I just finished counting.

I look back down at my ledger to correct the keg count, just in time to see the sugar crates beside me disappearing in my peripheral vision. I

glance up and hurry after Rodriguez. “Wait! I haven’t finished counting those!”

Rodriguez laughs as he takes the first step below. “Should’ve counted faster, lordling.”

“Come on, I’m just doing what the captain asked me to do,” I groan.

He narrows his pretty blue eyes, but he’s still smiling. He’s in a good mood, for whatever reason. “Twenty,” he says.

“What?”

“There are twenty. We’ve taken down five already; this is the sixth.” He nods to the remaining pile. “And there are fourteen left.”

I turn to follow his gaze and see that he’s right. “Ah. Thank you.” I shouldn’t be surprised that he can do such basic sums, but the privileged snob in me *is* a little surprised nonetheless. I’m ashamed enough by the thought that I dare not share it. I simply log the number, and then a mug of beer appears under my nose.

I move my ledger quickly to keep anything from spilling on it and take the mug with a smile. “Thank you, Billy.”

“Captain says to take the rest of the evening off, if you’re finished counting.”

“How generous of him, since I would have already been finishing up around this time,” I reply with a smirk.

Billy grins back at me. “Yes, but you slept till after noon,” he returns.

Touché.

I say nothing to that as I bury my nose in the beer. I’m not much of a beer drinker myself, but this one is well balanced and leaves no bitter aftertaste. It’s *good* beer. Although I’ll take anything over the grog we’re served morning and night. “Everyone’s in good spirits,” I point out unnecessarily.

“It was a good haul,” Billy says with a nod. “And an easy one.”

I’m not sure what qualifies a haul as easy or difficult, but I don’t much care. I’m enjoying the beer too much to press further. “I saw quite a bit of

fruit," I say instead. "Oranges and grapes. I thought I saw bananas, too, but when I went back to count, I was wrong."

"The men threw them overboard."

"What?" I set my beer down and look at Billy. "Why on earth would they—"

"They're bad luck."

"That's absurd."

Billy looks at me and smiles. "You ever see a shipwreck, Kit?"

I'm not sure what that has to do with bananas. "No," I admit. "Although I once saw a vessel burned off the port in Falmouth for pox."

"Seen my fair share of them. The men, too. You can always see bananas floating in the wreckage."

I laugh, but the look he gives me shuts me up quickly. "You're having me on," I insist.

He shakes his head. "Not worth the risk to take 'em on board. Which is a real shame, because I'd do anything for some fresh plantains."

"What is that? Some kind of Cuban dish made with bananas?"

"No, they're a different fruit," Billy explains. "But they look very similar. My mother used to make the most delicious maduros with them." He's mentioned his mother before in stories about growing up first in the colonies, then Cuba.

"Are they also bad luck?"

Billy looks like he's considering this. "You know," he says, "I don't know. But I think the men wouldn't be able to tell the difference. At least . . . the white men."

He gives me a pointed look, and I offer a sheepish smile in return. "I won't disagree with you," I confess, and take another sip of my beer.

Billy pats me on the shoulder. "Go on and get yourself something to eat, Kit. The men are in good spirits—it's a good night to make friends. You ought to start spending time with someone *other* than Renard."

I see the truth in that, though I don’t correct him by reminding him that I have also made friends with the twins. I simply nod before he leaves my side to join the captain, Mr. Tydes, and Martel, the sailing master, up on the poop deck. I look down at the ledger in my hand . . . and then smile as an idea sparks to life. Billy has inspired me. I think I finally know how to make the crew of the *Deliverance* like me—or at least *tolerate* me.

I really ought to be offended by the dubious stare Captain Sharpe greets me with the next morning as I swan into his office at half past nine. Apparently, that is far earlier than I have ever appeared in his presence, for he pulls out his pocket watch *twice* to make sure he’s got the time right.

“Good morning, Kitten,” he says, his voice laced with suspicion.

“Is it?” I ask as I plop my ledger onto his desk. I took it down to the mess with me the night before. “You sound *thrilled* to see me.”

“You want something.”

I gasp and set a hand over my heart. “You cut me to the quick, Captain.”

“Cut the shit.”

I can’t stop the laugh that bubbles out of me. I am in a grand mood today. I had *good* beer last night—quite a bit of it—and I wasn’t threatened or pushed around even once. “You’re charming this morning,” I say as I drop into his chair as if it were my own. He stares at me with one brow raised, and I know that if I weren’t as pretty as I am, he would already have dragged me out by the collar and reprimanded me for insubordination.

But I *am* pretty.

I offer him a wide smile and bat my lashes. “Captain,” I start.

“Ah, here it comes,” he says, moving around the desk to perch beside me on the corner.

“When was the last time you purchased new bedding for the crew?”

“Is that what you’re after? A new blanket? The men are in charge of their own bunks,” Captain Sharpe says. “They all know that.”

“Mmm, to be sure,” I say with a nod that tells him I haven’t heeded a word he’s said. “But wouldn’t it be nice if you, their *captain*, were to . . . surprise them all?”

“Surprise them? This isn’t a pleasure barge, Kitten,” Captain Sharpe reminds me, but he’s grinning, his sharp eyes narrowed in clear amusement. “What are you up to?”

“I just thought—”

“For fuck’s sake, spit it out.”

“The men confided in me that they want new blankets, but none of them are willing to be the first to purchase one.”

“The men confided in *you*,” he repeats slowly.

“Ah, well . . . Trevor and Tristan mentioned that the men had spoken about such things . . .”

“Mm-hmm . . .”

I sigh and look up at him with my best puppy-dog eyes, for they have never failed me when I wanted something I ought not to have. He simply stares back, unmoved.

Peeved, I release a puff of air through my lips and cross my arms. “Come now, you clearly have the means for it. Look at the ledger!” I flip it open and motion to yesterday’s shipment. “If you can get your hands on such a large haul without it costing you much at all, you clearly have some pull. Trade a few casks of port—that’ll be plenty to cover new bedding.”

“What do you get out of this, Kitten?” Captain Sharpe asks. He sounds genuinely curious now, at least.

I bite my lip and close the ledger, strumming my fingertips against it. “Well . . . I wouldn’t mind credit for giving you the idea.”

“That so?”

I look up at him, pouting once more, but with much less gusto. “There are over two hundred men on this ship, and I’ve made friends with four.

And I can name perhaps another three who don’t want to break my very unique and attractive nose. I would look positively dreadful with a broken nose, Captain.”

“Have you tried not being a little shit?” he asks, smirking down at me.

I wrinkle said attractive nose at the suggestion. “You might as well ask me to turn water into wine.”

He barks out a hearty laugh, and I know I’ve won. Even as he shakes his head and gets to his feet, I know. “You work out the maths on the bedding, Kitten, and handle the trade when we reach port, and you can have your new blankets.”

“Pillows, too?”

“Get the hell out of my chair.”

I smile up at him and get to my feet. “Aye, aye, Captain,” I say as I step out of his way. Then I snatch up my ledger and take my place on his settee.

“Two hundred and thirty-four,” he says a moment later, and I turn to look at him with an unspoken question written across my brow. “There are two hundred and thirty-four souls aboard this ship, myself included,” he replies.

I smile again and nod. “Thank you, Captain.”

And just like that, his attention is once more buried in his maps, and I am left to my scheming.

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Nine

I spend the next fortnight carefully cultivating friendships with the crew. Though the men are largely still suspicious of me, for some reason they remain in high spirits as we make our way south to a place called the Fortunate Islands. It sounds a bit made up to me, and as I peruse the map on Captain Sharpe's desk, noting where his compass lies, I deduce that we must be planning to make port on the Canaries of Spain.

My Spanish is passable, at least.

I have managed to convince Captain Sharpe to allow me to trade three of the fifteen casks of port when we arrive. I'm not sure whether it was my pretty green eyes or his morbid curiosity that convinced him, but I'm grateful all the same.

Though . . . I like to think it was the green eyes that did him in.

I pull my ledger out of the top drawer of Captain Sharpe's desk and flip through it as I walk back out on deck. It took about three pages of scribbles, but I figured out the maths on my planned trade. So long as I am able to haggle for what I deem to be fair prices, I will have more than enough to pay for new pillows and blankets for every man aboard.

Armed with that knowledge, and with land in sight, I make my way down below to the galley to chat with Cook.

I don’t know the man’s given name—everyone seems to just call him Cook. I swear, he’s got to be at least fourscore and five, but he’s sturdy for an older man. Not like my father or Prince Henry.

His black hair is long, though he keeps it tied back with a strip of softened leather. His skin is bronze like mine, and he has a coarse beard and mustache, which he keeps surprisingly tidy for a seafarer. He wears his shirtsleeves rolled up from the heat of the fire, exposing numerous tattoos along his forearms that seem to extend up under his shirt. I dare not ask to see them in full, but I can’t resist the urge to stare at them whenever he isn’t looking my way.

“Whatcha want, lordling?”

I wince as I lean against a support post by the hanging pots and pans, which rattle as they sway against one another. “Ah, I do love that nickname.”

“Until ya’ve earned another’n, it’ll stick.”

“So it would seem.”

“Get out, I’m busy.”

His tone is mild enough that I decide to be unconcerned with how busy he is. “When we reach port, I plan to do a bit of haggling for some extras on board the ship.”

“That so?”

I smile at him. “It is indeed.”

“Best take Rodriguez with ya.”

My smile falters. “My Spanish is perfectly adequate,” I insist.

“Maybe so, but yer a foppish-lookin’ little shit, and they won’t care how well ya speak Spanish if yer lookin’ down yer nose at ’em.”

“Rodriguez doesn’t much like me.” At that, he laughs but offers no further advice, so I decide to press on. “Anyway . . . I know you have your

usual allotment, but is there anything extra I can find for you that isn't on whatever arrangement you're used to?"

Cook raises one brow at me and gives me a slow once-over. "Campaignin' fer head boy, are ya?"

Head boy. Very cute. I smile again and open my ledger. "I could ask Martel instead. I have it on good authority that Frenchmen have exquisite taste when it comes to fine dining."

"Yer a right shit," Cook says, and motions toward my ledger. "Get me some chickens."

"Chickens?" I ask. "As in . . . live ones?"

"We used ta keep 'em below with goats fer fresh eggs and milk."

"Is there a particular reason we no longer do?" I ask warily.

"Got caught in the doldrums too long year past," he explains, as if any of that means anything to me. "Never replaced 'em."

"Right—how many do you want?"

He considers. "Near on two hundred'n forty men . . . Ten. Twenty if ya can."

"Twenty—my God. Have we a place to keep them?"

Cook nods. "I can get the lads to clean it up right smart again."

By "the lads," I assume he means Tristan and Trevor. I nod and set my ink on a shelf, then open it to dip my quill so I might take notes. "I assume we'll need feed for them as well . . . I should have enough for it. I'll do my best."

"See thatcha do, lad."

Lad. I much prefer that to "lordling." I snap my ledger shut and wink at Cook—which I realize is a step too far when he swings his spatula at me, but I laugh as I snatch up my inkpot and scurry out of the galley. I think I *will* take Rodriguez with me after all. I have no interest in handling livestock with my own two hands. The very thought of it is almost too much to bear.

When we make landfall, it's well into the afternoon, and it is *hot*. I'm so concerned with fanning myself with my ledger that somehow my legs forget how to work, and as I make my way off the dock and onto land, I lose my footing entirely and go stumbling off to the side.

Rodriguez catches me by the arm and hauls me back to my feet. "Watch it. Barely a month and you've already forgotten your land legs?"

"I must have tripped on something," I say, freeing myself from his grasp. I hardly make it another step before my legs are wobbling again. It's Tristan this time who hooks his arm with mine, and I lean on him as I try to wrap my head around what is happening.

"It's all right, Mr. Kit. Ye just need to get used to solid ground again."

"That makes no sense. The ground must be moving."

Rodriguez laughs again and pats me on the shoulder. "Don't worry, *Mr. Kit*," he says in a mocking lilt. "You'll figure it out."

I'm fairly alarmed, to be honest. My legs don't seem to be working correctly at all. But Tristan is smiling, and Trevor is grinning at me as if he placed a bet on whether I'd fall over once my feet touched the ground. I scowl at him and allow Tristan to help me walk as we make our way into the crowd.

Fortunately, it doesn't take me long to regain my "land legs." Tristan returns to helping Trevor and one of the new men—I never did get his name—drag the wagon with the three casks of port on it. I ruffle my hair a bit; it has gone wild and curly on me in the still, humid air.

When Rodriguez finally stops to speak to someone, I take a moment to look around. I've never seen a place quite like this—the beach is nothing like the ones in Falmouth, which are mostly shells, rock, and seaweed. *This* beach is white and nearly too bright to look at. The water is the most stunning shade of turquoise where it overlaps the shore, and beyond it, there

is an incredible display of cliffs and palm trees, which I have never seen in real life.

How unusual to see them in person, rather than in a work of art. I wonder if they really do have coconuts hanging from them.

“Think the cap’n will let us go swimmin’?” Trevor asks as he follows my gaze.

“Doubt it,” Tristan says with a sigh. “He doesn’t want to be here long.”

“Pity,” Trevor grumbles.

I grimace. I, for one, am glad Captain Sharpe has us on a tight schedule. I have no interest in humiliating myself on the beach.

My attention is torn from the shoreline when a tattooed hand appears in my line of vision, fingers snapping rudely. “Niño!”

I jerk my head around to look at the man. “Boy”? I can’t hide my indignation, which makes Rodriguez laugh.

“¿Cuánto por todos?”

I stare at him for a moment longer, trying to decide if I want to address the utter lack of respect. Ah—this is what Cook meant. I shake my head and motion to the three casks behind me. “Tengo tres barriles de vino de Oporto,” I explain. “Mil cien reales de a ocho.”

“Mil cien,” the tattooed man repeats, and whistles, then looks over to Rodriguez, who’s openly grinning now. I can’t tell if they’re mocking me or not.

“It’s a fair price,” I say in English, because I won’t be toyed with. “You know it is. They’re worth more than eleven hundred.”

The man chuckles good-naturedly and pats my shoulder. “Sí, sí,” he agrees. He motions to his men and turns to Rodriguez. They talk too quickly for me to follow word for word—and this man speaks with a dialect I’m not familiar with. His consonants are softer than I’m used to, his pronouns informal.

I understand well enough that Rodriguez is explaining our desire for bedding for the ship. I decide to let him handle it as I watch two men turn

one cask upright and fuss with the spigot. Alarmed, I hold a hand up and step forward to stop them, but Trevor yanks me back and shakes his head.

They open the spigot and, to my horror, allow some of the port to spill out onto the ground. (I could simply faint.) They stick a flask under the flow, not soon enough, and I quietly mourn the bloodred stain soaking into the earth below. When they get the flask full, they close the spigot, then hand the flask to the tattooed man. He sips and hands it back, then nods and smiles at me.

I smile back, though I know I must look more horrified than pleased. He doesn't seem to care, though. He points at me. "Almohadas y mantas," he says, then holds up two fingers, then four, and a fist.

I nod. "Sí," I say. Two hundred forty is plenty.

The tattooed man nods and waves a hand for me to follow him. I look at Rodriguez, who motions for me to go on ahead. I do, and thankfully, he follows, while Trevor and Tristan hang back.

Regretfully, the remainder of the daylight hours on land are spent following this man in and out of various buildings while Rodriguez does most of the negotiating, though he allows me to make the decisions. In the end we acquire 240 blankets and pillows of acceptable quality, and I make a special request for one set of bedding that is of significantly higher quality than the rest. I ask the man to wrap that set in canvas.

There is some confusion about the balance owed to us, but I allow Rodriguez to handle it, and we leave with our pillows, blankets, and two hundred pieces of eight. The sky is a riot of autumnal colors as we return to the docks. I regret somewhat that I didn't get to spend any time exploring the island, but I'm sure there will be time for that at a different port.

"I have one more thing I need to buy," I say to the twins. "Can you two handle getting all this onto the ship?"

Trevor nods. "Tris can go ahead 'n' get some of the crew to help."

"Good." I smile and pat Trevor on the shoulder, then turn back to Rodriguez, who nods and waves a hand for me to follow him.

“Your daddy a man of business or something?” he asks as we make our way through the thinning crowds.

“Should we have brought someone to help us?” I reply, ignoring the question.

“Chickens don’t weigh much. You’ll be fine,” Rodriguez says with a grin.

I shoot him a withering glare—or at least my best attempt at one. I rather think, based on his laughter and what I know to be my very charming good looks, that it was likely more of a sulky pout than anything.

“They’ll have a wagon,” he says, slapping me on the shoulder in a way that is so masculine and friendly, it disarms me. I daresay Rodriguez may not hate me quite so much as I thought he did. Then he looks me over and frowns like he’s assessing me. “You know, you ought to be careful who you’re makin’ friends with.”

Where did that come from? What an odd thing to say. I frown back at him, but before I can ask him to elucidate, he nods toward the gate we are approaching and holds a hand up to call a greeting to the property’s owner.

Buying the chickens is a chaotic blur of language barriers. The owner’s Spanish is so unusual to my ears, I have to leave Rodriguez to the negotiations. In the end he hands the man the full two hundred Spanish dollars just not to have to deal with him anymore, and the man happily loads fifteen chickens and enough grain to feed them for a few months into a wagon.

We ride back to the dock with them, and I don’t complain that we overpaid for fewer chickens than I wanted, because I am too exhausted to care at this point, and because I accomplished more today than I ever have in such a short amount of time. When we board the ship again, I am greeted with grinning men who all take turns slapping me on the back or shoulder.

This is an entirely new experience. While I was used to being well liked among my peers—at least my *single* peers—at Eton, I’m not used to being greeted with praise and comradery of this sort, and certainly not from a

group of over two hundred men who, until today, thought very little of me. If they thought of me at all.

There is a strange swelling in my chest as I watch the crew gather their new blankets and pillows. They've queued up, and Billy hands the bedding off one by one from the pallet they used to raise the parcel onto the ship. I don't have time to see the chickens taken belowdecks, or to really talk to anyone, before Tristan is grabbing me by the wrist and pulling me toward the stairs.

"Cook wants to see ye," he yells over the commotion. "Got somethin' special for supper."

I follow, tired and satisfied from the day's work. I glance around one last time as I start down the stairs—and just before my head disappears belowdecks, I catch Captain Sharpe's eye for the briefest of moments. He's staring at me strangely, one brow raised, a smirk tugging at his mouth. My belly does a strange little flip as I realize that this may be the first time in my life anyone has ever looked at me in such a way. It's something I've never allowed myself to openly want . . . but it's something I know I've always yearned for.

His eyes crinkle in the corners when he catches my gaze, his smile widening, and I could vomit from the way my insides turn to butterflies. I swallow back the urge as I duck my head belowdecks, wondering if this is what my classmates at Eton felt when their fathers looked at them at our graduation ceremony.

Thankfully, I haven't time to linger on why *my* father never had that sort of smile for me before I am greeted with a chorus of warm welcomes, and a bowl of hot stew and *fresh* bread are pushed into my shaking hands.

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Part II

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JULY 1700(ISH)

If only Digby Hale could see me now.

We are well into summer, and I, Christopher-Henry Mortimer Davenport, have become a new man. (Well, very *nearly* a man, at least according to the calendar.) I'm a genuine sailor now. My transformation to "Mr. Kit" Mortimer is complete—and I must say, I rather like this dashing new me.

While I have yet to win over every man on the crew, the gift of new bedding and occasional fresh eggs has significantly decreased the odds of me getting my nose broken or being thrown overboard. (It has also made a marginal improvement on the stink in the fo'c'sle, though in truth, I think I may simply be nose blind to it now.) I still hate the feeling of going too long without washing, however, and on a few occasions have bribed Tristan to bring a bucket of warmed seawater to the hold for me to wash up as best I can while he stands guard.

He's a good chap, Tristan. He's held fast to his role as my favorite person on the ship. Trevor has warmed up to me too, though he is still far less sweet than Tristan. I enjoy every moment I spend with them, and they

have made a point to spend as much time with me as they can. They have even taught me to play dice—and I have taught them to play cards in turn. One of the two of them still has my deck.

Captain Sharpe remains as enamored with me as always. I might go as far as to say he finds me irresistible, but that would be a flagrant lie. In fact, I think he rather delights in the act *of* resisting me—which is delicious fun. He always finds a way to change the subject when I mention how much more appealing his new bedding is, though I can tell by the twinkle in those exquisite brown eyes of his that he agrees.

We've begun to take elevenses together. Mr. Tydes hates this new habit, though I have invited him on more than one occasion to join us. Captain Sharpe simply sits back and smiles as he watches me try my damnedest to charm that curmudgeonly old coot.

At least the rest of the crew has been more susceptible to my inexorable charm. Not long after my successful stunt with the bedding, the men began to knock on Captain Sharpe's door to make requests of me for whenever we next reached port. Quickly it became clear that I could no longer work on his settee every day. Now, after I take elevenses with the captain, the twins set up a table for me just outside his door and take turns sitting with me as I do my work, pausing to take said requests. Some I can manage, some I have yet to procure. Others are less feasible. I cannot smuggle a harem of girls onto the ship, but I do hope to find Billy his plantains someday.

As I take requests, I teach Tristan or Trevor—whoever is sitting with me at the time—to read and write. Can you believe it? Me, a tutor! My classmates at Eton would simply die if they knew. I even enjoy doing it!

This morning it is Tristan at my side. I've pulled a novel from my trunk, an item I don't even remember packing. (The damned thing must have fallen off a shelf and landed in my pile of clothes or something.) It's absolutely filthy, and I'm thoroughly enjoying the way Tristan's face goes red each time he comes to a naughty bit and has to read it out loud to me. I don't think I've ever enjoyed something quite as much as this.

I’ve also allowed my hair to grow out. Originally, it was merely because I had no idea how to cut it myself. Then, as it got longer and more annoying, I wasn’t sure whom I could ask to cut it for me. Cook offered once, but the way he held up his hatchet with a wild-eyed expression made me decide then and there that I would simply grow it out.

Now it looks rather dashing . . . when I am indoors and can keep it contained with a bit of ribbon. At the moment, as I sit at my table out on deck, it is far removed from anything resembling tame.

As the wind whips my loose curls from their queue, I tug the ribbon free and begin the work of smoothing it back once more—not an easy task in the warm Caribbean wind. I’ve yet to learn how to pull it back properly, as I’ve never allowed it to grow this long before. I am still struggling to smooth my hair when I hear Tristan make a strangled sound beside me.

I turn to him as I wrap the ribbon around the hair at the base of my neck and tie it into a tight bow. “All right there, Tris?”

He hesitates, and I am sure he’s about to ask me how to pronounce “fornication” or something similar, when Mr. Tydes comes barging past my table to pound on the captain’s door.

“Captain! Sail ho!”

Tristan is on his feet in an instant. He runs toward the port bow, and I am left staring after him as the captain’s cabin door swings open behind me.

“Where?” he booms.

“Off the port bow,” Mr. Tydes says.

They pass me, but the captain pauses to look back with a frown. “Bring the ledgers inside and lock them in my top drawer, Kit.”

There is a ship on the horizon; I can understand why he’d want the books locked away. The ship’s finances are no one’s business but his. I gather the ledgers and my ink and quill and carry them into his cabin to lock them all in the top drawer of his desk, which he has emptied for my personal use.

Before I can step back out on deck, Captain Sharpe is pushing into the cabin. He makes his way across the room in a few long strides and grabs a sword down from his weapons wall. He hesitates, then grabs a gun as well.

My heart sinks into my gut as I watch him. Something is wrong.

“Captain?”

“Kit, go belowdecks and keep out of sight,” Sharpe says as he makes his way back to the door. “Don’t come out, no matter what you hear.”

I intercept him, setting a hand on his chest, before he can push past me. “What’s going on?”

“Do as I say, Kitten.”

He sounds so serious that now I am genuinely afraid. I swallow back the hard lump forming in my throat and follow him out on deck. The ship is nearer than I expected, and it’s large. Nothing about it looks particularly menacing, but I am terrified all the same.

“Are we about to be attacked by pirates?” I ask.

I can sense the sudden stillness that falls over the men around us, though I am staring at Captain Sharpe as his face makes a fascinating journey from amusement to disbelief and lands on something I can only describe as bewildered horror. I hear someone laugh, and then my ears begin to ring as I watch Captain Sharpe’s perfect mouth form the words: “Lad—we *are* the pirates.”

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Four months.

Four months I have lived on this ship . . . and yet I am absolutely flabbergasted. Flummoxed even. I am downright *confounded*, and perhaps if I sit here in my hiding spot and continue to go through the entire list of synonyms in my head, I will not have to process the humiliating and terrifying truth of Captain Sharpe's words.

Pirates.

PIRATES.

I have somehow *accidentally* become a pirate! I'm not sure if I am afraid or just mortified. These men have become like a family to me over the last few months, and though I always knew they were a bit rough around the edges, I never once pegged them as *bloodthirsty criminals*!

Is my life now in danger? Or merely my pride? This will likely go one of two ways: They will reveal some calculated plot to ransom me back to my awful family, or they will mock me relentlessly for my sheer stupidity. I keep thinking back to Renard's face when I told him that I had chosen the *Deliverance* out of convenience. He has known from the start what an absolute boob I am.

I look up at the sound of gunfire overhead. When Captain Sharpe told me to get out of sight, I ran below with the intention of hiding in the hold—but the sound of a cannon, and the reverberating jolt of the shot, send me scurrying behind the stairs to the officers' quarters. There is nowhere to hide in the open layout of the fo'c'sle. I try the door to the officers' salon first but find it locked. As are the next two doors. It is the door to Renard's quarters that finally gives way. I stumble into the room, slam the door behind me, and shove a chair under the handle.

It will do nothing to keep out an aggressor who truly wants to get in, so stuffing it there was unnecessary. Even if it *would* keep an aggressor out, I realize with a small pang of guilt that there is no aggressor after me. Captain Sharpe told me to hide; if he meant to hurt me, he wouldn't have made such an effort.

Or he wants me to hide so whoever is on that ship doesn't know he has a viscount held captive!

No, I am being ridiculous. I glance around the dimly lit room. I've been in here once or twice before, sharing a drink with a few of the men, but being in here alone feels like a huge overstep. Still, I can't bring myself to go back out into the open just yet, so I sit on the edge of Renard's bed and cover my ears to block out the sound of guns and shouting.

Captain Sharpe has no idea I am a viscount. He knows I'm a rich nobleman who is running away from my problems, nothing more. Though he has teased me here and there about being secretive, he has never once truly asked me why I boarded his ship. He either doesn't care or is the sort of man who believes everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt.

Which isn't very pirate-like, really, if you think about it.

Nothing about Captain Sharpe is pirate-like, in fact. He is intelligent and well mannered. He wears clothes fine enough that he could almost pass for a gentleman, and he carries himself with elegance. Is this a snobbish thing to think? Or is it snobbish only if I mean it in a bad way? Admittedly, my knowledge of pirates is limited to rumors spread by the kin of sailors.

If Captain Sharpe said not to come out, no matter what I hear, how will I know when to come out? Am I to sit down here for the remainder of our voyage? Surely Renard will want his bed back at some point. I can't imagine he'll be pleased to find me in here to begin with.

I jump at the sound of a particularly shrill scream and raise my eyes to the ceiling once more, as if it might offer some insight as to the happenings on deck. Shockingly, it does not. In fact, I can barely see it in the dim light offered by the one measly porthole over Renard's bed. Not only is it useless in lighting the room, but the porthole is on the side facing *away* from the other ship, so I can't even look through it to see what's happening. Although I am not sure I really want to.

The moment the thought crosses my mind, a body plummets down directly in front of the porthole. I swear I saw a sword run straight through the man's stomach—but was it one of *their* men or ours?

A wave of nausea hits me as forcefully as I imagine that man's body hitting the water. What am I *doing* here? I could be drinking at a party, or at home eating a fine dinner beside my pregnant wife—ah, yes. That's why I am here.

In truth, my time on board the *Deliverance* has allowed me to reflect further on poor Katherine Stuart—and though I did wrong her by jilting her on her wedding day, I still believe I did her a service by not allowing her to marry a confirmed bachelor. It's not her fault she was partnered with the absolute worst human in England; I just cannot be a married man. The thought of being tied down in such a way terrifies me, and to be trapped in a loveless marriage after being raised in a loveless home is far too terrible to consider.

But . . . am I better off *here*, cowering away from the violence on deck? Thinking about my dubious life choices and moral failings in this moment is giving me a headache.

Or perhaps it's the guns and screaming.

Either way, my head is starting to pound and nausea roils at my insides. I lie on my side and pull my legs close to my chest, then grab the lumpy

monstrosity Renard calls a pillow—truly, why does he still have this after all my efforts on the Canaries?—and jam it over my head to muffle the sounds of gunshots and screaming men.

Miraculously, it helps. The battle on deck is muffled into occasional soft booms and distant cries. It does nothing to dull the shudder of the *Deliverance* with each cannon blast, however. The smell of gunpowder is overpowering, even here in Renard's quarters. It almost entirely masks the smell of body odor and liquor that usually lingers in here. I close my eyes and try to tune it out. I don't want to think about how many of my friends are dying up on deck while I cower down here in the dark.

Before I know it, I am startled out of my thoughts by a bang on the door.

"Damn it, Kit!" Renard grunts through the one-inch opening he's managed. I sit up and slide off the bed, but then stop myself before pulling the chair out of the way.

"What do you want?" I demand. Bold of me, considering I am in *his* room.

"Ta go ta fuckin' bed," Renard replies, sounding irritable. "An' ta have a drink. Open the door!"

I shouldn't. Captain Sharpe told me not to. "Captain—"

"He said ta find ye—open the door an' stop bein' a wee shit."

I let out a puff of air and cross my arms. He's probably telling the truth. In any case, if he wanted to hurt me, he *could* simply kick the door down.

"I didn't know you were pirates . . ."

"Oh, I ken," Renard says, and now he sounds amused. I can see him smirking through the slightly open door.

That familiar mocking expression on his handsome face is enough to calm my nerves somewhat. Or at least to annoy me enough that I forget I am meant to be afraid. I step over to the door and push it closed, then tug the chair out from under the knob. I slide it back under his small desk and open the door fully.

“You could have told me.”

Renard gives an unfriendly laugh and steps into his room. I should be grateful that he doesn’t reprimand me, but I am instantly overwhelmed by the sight of blood splattered across his shirt and throat. The nausea comes roiling back with a force. He seems uninjured, but I’m not sure if that’s better or worse—that it’s someone *else’s* blood. “I coulda,” Renard agrees. “Fer an educated lad, yer no’ all that bright, are ye?”

I should be offended. I *am* a little offended, but he’s also painfully correct, and I can’t say anything to argue with him. And I am still terribly unnerved by the blood covering his front. So instead I just huff and roll my eyes as I step out of his room.

I make my way back toward the fo’c’sle slowly, keeping my head down and trying to remain out of sight. I’m still not sure whether I’m afraid or embarrassed. As I round the corner and make it to the doorway, one of the crew grabs me by the shoulder. Rodriguez.

“Where’d you go off to, lordling?” he asks, shoving a mug of ale into my hands. “You missed all the fun!”

We’ve got on just fine since the Canaries, but the use of “lordling” instead of the usual “Mr. Kit” has me a little on edge. Is he drunk, or angry with me? Or both?

His mood seems strange, and he smells of metal. I lower my eyes, and the sight of blood on his shirt too sends my queasy stomach roiling once again. Is it *his* blood or the blood of some innocent merchant?

And what does it say about me that I hope it’s the latter?

I exhale sharply through my nose and swallow the bile in my throat as I turn my eyes away. “I had to hide the ledgers.”

He laughs and slaps my shoulder a few times, then takes the mug of ale back to drink half of it himself. I can see bottles and mugs being passed around generously between hammocks. The men are getting rowdy drunk in some kind of celebration, and I think it would be wise for me to stay out of the way.

I slip free from his grasp and duck under his drinking arm to flee toward the stairs. I struggle for a moment with the decision: up or down? I feel ridiculous. The sight of boots on the stairs makes my choice for me. I hurry down and make my way toward the hold. The hold is familiar; I spend many days down there taking stock of the inventory with the twins.

When I finally reach the hold and slam the door behind me, I am met at last with blissful quiet. The sound of water moving against the walls drowns out the drunken celebration and revelations that have me so rattled. I should be out there drinking and celebrating too . . . shouldn't I? I love getting drunk and having a grand time, but my nerves are shot. And anyway, I'm not so sure I can stomach a celebration after watching a man fall to his death. Even the recollection sends a wave of nausea through me.

I slide between the stacks of crates to a space only the twins and I know about. I found it one day by accident, and Tristan confessed that he and Trevor set up the crates this way so they could sneak down to nap during the day sometimes. There is a blanket on the floor and a makeshift pillow made of a few rags folded together.

Right now I am more grateful than ever for the twins and their lazy cleverness. I sink down into the small space and lean back against one of the crates. The hold smells of fermenting fruit, which means there is likely a crate of produce somewhere we didn't account for. I don't mind the scent; it could almost pass for wine.

Almost.

I will sleep here for a little while, and when the men have drunk themselves into oblivion, I will sneak out on deck and find Captain Sharpe. We reach port in just a few days. I will get off the ship then and find another one to take me back to Europe. Not to England. But I could see myself bashing around Paris for a few months. And this time I will make sure the ship I choose is *not* full of pirates. Even though I would miss the tentative brotherhood blossoming between the twins and myself . . .

Though perhaps not as much as I would miss the sound of that rumbling baritone muttering "Kitten" with barely contained exasperation.

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Twelve

I don’t sleep. My mind races all night, and when I finally can’t stand it anymore, I crawl out of my hiding spot and open the door as quietly as I can. I am utterly exhausted and in desperate need of a soft bed. I haven’t a clue what time it is; I really ought to inquire about purchasing a pocket watch at port.

The ship is quiet. But as I make my way up to the deck, feeling my way through the dark, I hear soft voices: the night crew, still working. It’s too early for me to be up here.

The light from the sliver of the crescent moon overhead casts an eerie glow over the *Deliverance* as I make my way across the deck to the captain’s cabin. I am careful not to look too closely at the deck, lest there be any remnants of the bloodshed from this morning. When I slip and catch myself on the railing of the quarterdeck steps, I tell myself it was soapy water and not blood that nearly sent me toppling.

One more step and I am in front of the stained-glass door to Sharpe’s cabin. For a moment I consider knocking, but change my mind and try the handle instead.

To my amazement, it’s unlocked.

I slip into the room as quietly as I can. Once the door is closed behind me, it’s dead silent and pitch black inside. The room smells of metal. Not the metallic tang of blood, but the distinctive tangy scent of coins. Over that I detect the musk of old papers and the sulfuric scent of snuffed-out candles. It’s a familiar smell, and it has somewhat of a calming effect on my frayed nerves. I keep still for a few moments, holding my breath and willing my heart to shut up as I listen for any signs of wakefulness from Captain Sharpe, who is likely passed out in his elegant bed. He doesn’t immediately swear at me or throw a dagger at my head, so I assume he hasn’t woken up.

I tiptoe across the room, knowing my way by heart. When my outstretched fingers find the worn velvet of the settee in the middle of the room, my pulse eases and I exhale slowly. I sit and slide my feet out of my shoes, just barely able to hold in the groan of relief as I stretch my toes. I don’t care how angry he’ll be to find me sleeping on his settee; I’m exhausted and desperate for a cushion to lie on. I get comfortable, pulling my shirt collar up to cover my face, since I have no blanket to snuggle into.

Seconds later the clink of glass on wood startles me awake.

“Ah, His Highness has woken,” Captain Sharpe purrs from beside me.

I sit up abruptly and do a quick scan of the room. Somehow, in less than a minute, the sun has risen and is now shining brightly through the large windows along the gallery. I squint into the light and turn to face Captain Sharpe, who is standing over me with his arms crossed, wearing an expression somewhere between vexed and amused.

“Good morning, Captain,” I mutter as I reach for the teacup on the table before me.

He snorts and sits beside me, shaking his head as he snatches up his own teacup. “I had the men looking for you half the night.”

“No you didn’t.”

His brows rise, and he stares at me over his cup. He’s most definitely annoyed.

“You would have found me in minutes if you’d asked the twins where I was.”

He’s silent a moment longer before he begins to laugh. He sips his tea and sets the cup down with a great imitation of a long-suffering sigh. “And where were you?”

“Hiding.”

He levels a look at me. “What are you doing on my settee?”

I frown into my tea. It has no sugar, and I am not a fan of tea without sugar. I dare not ask for it right now, though. “I *was* sleeping,” I point out. “Before you woke me up.”

He laughs again and rubs his hands over his face. “Kitten . . . that mouth of yours is going to get you killed one day.”

I grimace and set my tea down. Its bitterness does nothing to wash away the bad taste in my mouth from last night’s attack. “Yes, my father often tells me so.”

Again Captain Sharpe’s brows arch up. He watches me closely, and I try very hard not to stare back at him. “Why were you sleeping on my settee?”

“The bed was taken.”

I don’t know *why* I’m being such a colossal ass right now. Sneaking into his cabin was unwise. He’s being gracious by not knocking me on my ass.

I sigh and look up at him. “I didn’t know what else to do,” I confess pathetically. “I was afraid to go back to my hammock.”

He frowns, and I realize my error. I’ve insulted him. By admitting my fear in returning to my assigned bed, I’ve acknowledged that my opinion of the crew has changed. I’m not sure how to fix this, and when I open my mouth to try to correct myself, he holds up a hand and shakes his head.

“We’re the same people we were yesterday, Kitten.”

I grimace as I look up at him, torn between my own bias and the truth of how I’ve grown to love these men. *Are* they truly the same? Doesn’t murder change a person? Doesn’t thievery diminish a man? But then that damned nickname. My body goes slack at the sound of it, and I want to cry. From

relief? From humiliation? I don’t know, but my breath hitches, and I cover my face with my hands to try to stop my emotions from bubbling over.

“Cook is serving breakfast now. Fresh eggs and fish. Go down and eat with the crew. Make it clear to them you aren’t a threat.”

“A threat?” I ask, my voice strangled as I look up at Captain Sharpe.

“Your wealth and social status make you a threat to our kind if you choose to be. You could turn on us when we reach the next British port.”

“But I—”

“Prove it.”

I swallow and get to my feet. “You can’t possibly believe I would turn on you like that.”

“I don’t,” Captain Sharpe says, his voice softening. “But the men don’t know you as I do. I’ve watched you change over the last few months, Kitten. I saw the moment you took off that stuffy cravat and loosened the top button of your shirt for the first time. The moment you rolled up the sleeves of your expensive linen shirt. The moment you left your jacket on the back of my desk chair and stepped out of this cabin in just your waistcoat, shirt, and breeches. You may have been born a gentleman, but you’re a seaman now.”

His attentiveness both moves and terrifies me. I understand what he’s saying. I feel the truth of it in my bones: I’m no longer trapped under the scrutiny of high society. Here at sea, I’ve become free in a way I never knew possible.

But I don’t want to live the rest of my life at sea. I don’t want to spend the next few years pillaging trade ships and killing British infantry. I don’t want to die at the noose before I reach twenty-five, as so many men who choose this life do. I wonder for a brief moment if Prince Henry *would* hang me. I wonder if my father would intervene, or if he would attend my hanging with an alfresco meal and a cigar to celebrate.

“How long have you been at sea, Captain Sharpe?”

“Twelve years, six months, three weeks, and two days,” he says.

I’m startled by his answer. I stare at him, frowning. “How old are you?” I ask, suspicious now that Renard’s assumption was more accurate than I realized.

Sharpe smiles almost ruefully and picks up his teacup once more. “Three and twenty.”

So Renard wasn’t wrong. Sharpe was a mere child when he became a sailor. Eleven is so terribly young to live at sea like this. “Why—”

“Go eat, Kitten,” he says firmly. “When you finish, we have a great deal to add to the ledgers.”

With that, he stands, teacup in hand, and makes his way out of the cabin to have his tea in the fresh sea air, as he does every morning.

I am rarely up early enough to eat breakfast with the men, so I take my time changing into fresh clothes and wetting my hair with the pitcher of water beside the captain’s bed.

As I kneel in front of my trunk and sift through the silks inside, my fingers brush something I don’t recognize by touch. I pinch the thick paper and pull it out. My heart races as I find myself staring at the envelope I found in my father’s desk. The envelope with my name on it.

I brush my fingers over the lettering and slowly turn it over to stare at the wax seal on the back. For a moment I am tempted. I touch the seal, but something makes me hesitate.

It’s ridiculous, but I can’t bring myself to break the seal. Not yet. I don’t know what’s in here, but I do know I’m not yet ready to open it. I shake my head and drop the envelope back into the trunk. Even touching it sends chills running down my spine.

I choose my clothes deliberately: black trousers and a white shirt, with a silver brocade waistcoat. It feels a bit like a costume, but I hope the sentiment will be clear to the crew. Black is the color of mourning in high

society, but the color of choice among pirates. I haven't a black shirt, so the rest will have to do.

They likely won't even notice, but it is my armor, and it makes me feel better. I roll up my sleeves and leave my shirt collar open, because Captain Sharpe had a point about my loosening up in the last few months. And because it's damned hot on the Caribbean Sea.

I smooth my dark, dampened waves back into a tiny queue at the base of my neck, tying a tight bow with my ribbon.

And then I am ready.

I make my way down to the galley and take a plate, far too aware of all the eyes on me as I gratefully choose a chunk of warm bread from the pile beside the fire. I glance up at Cook and nod without a word.

He goes very still, and then he begins to laugh.

I freeze, clinging to my plate, my cheeks turning to molten fire as everyone looks up, first at Cook, then at me. After a moment another man begins to laugh . . . and then another. Billy steps up beside me, laughing louder than the rest as he claps a hand onto my shoulder.

"Kit Mortimer," he announces. "The accidental gentleman pirate!"

They all laugh harder, and although my stomach is doing somersaults, the muscles of my jaw twitch and tug until I give in to the sheepish grin pulling at my mouth. I am grateful to him. I wait as he fills his own plate, then nudges me from the galley and leads me down to the fo'c'sle with the other men. Despite being an officer, Billy prefers to dine with the crew.

I hear a few shouts of "the accidental gentleman pirate!" as I walk by. Word travels even faster in the confines of a ship than in the French court—but I'm not complaining. Their amusement is the perfect buffer. I allow the men to tease me for my naïveté. I blush and laugh and cover my face at all the right moments, letting them see that my shock was sincere, but I am no threat. I sit on the floor with Billy on one side and Trevor on the other, as Tristan sits in my hammock nursing his morning ale.

After they've worn out the "accidental gentleman pirate" jokes, I take the opportunity to press Billy for the information Captain Sharpe so clearly avoided sharing with me.

"Billy, how long have you been with Captain Sharpe?"

Billy considers before he answers, taking the time to chew the bread in his mouth. "Three years and a half," he says with a nod. Only a little longer than Renard. "He's a good man."

A pirate and a good man. I can't help but smile a little at the wrongness of it. "Why did you decide to join him?"

Tristan and Trevor both go a little rigid. They sit up and offer Billy their full attention, though it seems like they already know what he is about to say.

"He plundered a ship off the coast of Cuba, not far from where we are now," Billy says. "There were hundreds of us on board . . . the *Success* was her name. She carried many from the colonies to the Caribbean and back again. It was my second time at sea in her grasp."

Something about the way he speaks makes my blood run cold. I set my ale down on the floor in front of me and watch his face as he stares at the empty plate in his lap.

"I was barely nine on my first voyage. My second came twenty years later, when my captor died and his son sold off all the men he'd enslaved."

Now I understand the ice in my veins. Never once when he told me stories of his childhood did he mention he had been enslaved. I wonder why that is.

Probably because I am just like the men who stole his freedom. I feel sick at the thought. I hope that's not how Billy looks at me. I hope that's not how *any* of the men on this ship look at me. In this moment I'm aware of my advantages in life in a way that makes me more uncomfortable than ever.

"Not a week had passed when the *Deliverance* came upon us," Billy continues. "The *Success* was no match for her. No guns, and the crew were

cruel but untrained.” He stares into his cup of ale as he speaks. Or rather, he seems to stare *through* it.

All at once I understand—or hope I understand—that Billy must be sharing this with me now because he doesn’t see me in the same light as the men who enslaved him. Men who take what they want with no consequences. Men like my father. Unlike me, Billy doesn’t judge men based on snap impressions—why else would he always have such a warm smile for me? If he thought I was capable of enslaving human beings, would he tease me or share the wonders of his culture with me thus?

Shame burns hot in my belly as I recall how ready I was to turn and run the moment I learned these men were pirates. Captain Sharpe was right—they *are* the same people they were before. The same men who looked at me with distrust but gave me a chance. The same men who granted me an opportunity to prove myself to them, despite my being the very embodiment of the system that beat them down.

Every interaction I have ever had with a servant flashes through my mind. Was I polite to them? Did I treat them with decency? Was I too entitled to stop and consider that they were people too? I can’t remember, and that scares me.

Billy sips his ale, and the movement brings me reeling back to the present. “Captain Sharpe made an example out of them. He cut them down one by one, and chose those among the captured who could sail to take over the *Success*. They renamed her *Hope*, and Captain Sharpe left the ship and our freedom to us.

“I knew right away I would follow Captain Sharpe to the ends of the earth for what he’d done. I asked to join his crew, and he smiled at me and said, ‘Welcome to the *Deliverance*, Billy.’”

I blink and sit up straighter. “He knew your name?”

Billy shakes his head. “No. He chose that name for me, and it felt right.”

I don’t ask how Sharpe knew he would need a new name. I suspect Captain Sharpe knows a great deal about a great many things. A great deal

more than me, for sure. My heart aches. “I’m sorry.”

“What have you got to be sorry for, Kit?”

“I don’t know,” I lie.

“Then don’t say you’re sorry.”

I grimace at my foolishness. He’s right. My words are hollow, and I should have kept my damned mouth shut instead of making this about me. I nod and turn to look at him. I don’t need to say anything more.

He is quiet as we stare into each other’s faces, and then he relaxes and shakes his head. “I’m a free man. I don’t want your pity, Kit.”

“You’re right,” I say quietly.

“Cap’n Sharpe is a good man,” Trevor interjects. “He’s a prince among pirates, ’n’ it’s an honor to serve under a cap’n like him.” I can’t help but think back to Renard saying that no man chooses a life at sea—that they are all in it for the money.

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

“He *is* a good man,” I whisper in agreement. I don’t know what else to say, but I know I must say something. I rub my hand across my mouth and exhale heavily, my nostrils flaring as I do. “Thank you for telling me your story, Billy.”

Billy nods and grips my shoulder before pulling himself to his feet. He takes his empty plate and ale, steps over me, and makes his way out of the fo’c’sle.

I hear a bell from up on deck, and Tristan, Trevor, and a few other men hurry to finish their food and ale as they head to the galley to drop off their plates.

I don’t follow. Instead I sit on the floor under my hammock in silence until the room around me is quiet but for a few soft voices. My opinion of Captain Sharpe has always been high, but I’ve just learned a great deal more about his character from Billy. When I finally pull myself to my feet, my knees wobble as they did when I first came aboard the *Deliverance*. I right myself and gather up my own plate and mug to drop at the galley

before I make my way above deck and report to work logging plunder with the prince among pirates.

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Thirteen

I can't say for sure why I throw myself so passionately into my work after Billy's words. But a fire has lit within me. I want nothing more than to prove my worth to Captain Sharpe and his crew. I want to *earn* their respect and goodwill, not demand it, like my father might. I can't turn into the sort of man who takes what he wants, no matter whom he hurts.

After logging yesterday's raid and spending half the afternoon doing inventory with both of the twins, I return to Sharpe's cabin to find it empty. I suppose now is as good a time as any to try my hand once more at following the money in Jeffrey Reuter's old ledgers. I pull them out with a sigh and attempt a new method of tracking them, jotting down notes on a page I ripped out of the back of one. Finally I start to see a pattern.

My pulse quickens as I throw myself into the work before me. Each small revelation paints a larger and more detailed picture, until my blood is rushing in my ears and I've lost all track of time.

"What are you doing sitting here in the dark?"

Captain Sharpe's voice startles me out of my focus, and I spin around to face him. How long has it been? My eyes have adjusted to the dark, and it takes me a moment to recognize it is sunset. "I hadn't realized . . ."

He chuckles and takes a candle from the sconce by the door, then carries it over to the desk to light all three wicks of his silver candelabra. “Hiding from my crew again?”

“No,” I say quickly, and my face warms. “I just . . . was finally starting to work out this old ledger.”

Sharpe’s brows draw together as he takes a seat on the edge of his desk. “I thought you’d given up on those.”

“I did . . . but I got to thinking about them again today. It never occurred to me before that Mr. Reuter’s arithmetic might not have been as terrible as I thought.”

“Meaning?”

“Well . . . I hadn’t considered that he might just have been dishonest.” I regret my words immediately, because I know how they sound—but before Sharpe can be offended, I slide the book to him and point to it. “See here?” I ask. “Read this.”

“Read it to me.”

I sigh and shake my head. “It’s too complicated to read a maths equation out loud. Go on.”

“Just explain it to me,” he insists.

I am getting a little annoyed now. “Captain. Please humor me. Just read this page, and I’ll—”

“I can’t read, lad,” Sharpe snaps at me as he gets to his feet.

My whole body goes perfectly still. I stare at the book instead of him, trying to sort out how it’s possible that the captain of a ship is unable to read.

Then I think back on all those times Mr. Tydes made a point of reading something aloud in an almost playfully dramatic way, to divert interest from the captain to himself. I think back on how Sharpe would admire my writing but never comment on the content of the page.

“I didn’t know,” I say finally, keeping my voice soft. Once more I have made an ass of myself.

“Let’s call it a night, Kitten. I’m tired.”

I frown down at the page and pull the book close to me once again. I’m not ready to call it a night. “I think Mr. Reuter was stealing from you.”

That gets Sharpe’s attention. He whirls to face me. “He what?”

I point to the page, though I immediately realize my error and carefully do not tell him to look where I’m pointing. “The numbers always add up when there’s food or livestock or even drink accounted for . . . but when there are small items of value, like jewels, banknotes, cloth, or rare spices . . . the numbers become less and less reliable, especially as you get nearer to port cities.”

Sharpe comes around the desk to kneel beside me and stare at the book as if he *can* read it. “That son of a bitch,” he whispers. “How much?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“How much did he take?” Sharpe asks.

I blink as I glance back at the notes. “I can’t be sure quite yet. I’d need more time to go over the books.”

“How much time?”

“A day or two?” I suggest.

Sharpe nods and his expression shifts into something pleased. “Kitten . . . you may have solved more than one mystery tonight.”

“What do you mean?”

He turns to me, his lips curling back into a wicked grin. “You’ll see soon enough. We’re changing course. Stay here and put the books away. We’re celebrating. There’s a case at the foot of my bed, behind your trunk. Choose a bottle and open it for us. I’ll be right back.”

He claps me on the shoulder and hauls himself to his feet. “Mr. Tydes!” he calls as he strides over to his cabin door and yanks it open. “Tydes, change course!” He slams the door behind him, and his footfalls are heavy on the stairs leading up to the helm overhead.

I make my way over to the crate, kneel before it, and lift the lid easily enough. I reach in and wrap my fingers around the cool glass of a bottle,

pulling it from the hay batting.

It’s port. It must be the port from the first raid after I joined the crew, now bottled. I can already taste it on my lips as I pull myself to my feet and admire the color of the liquid inside. It has been an age since I had such a fine liquor. Already my mouth is watering at the thought of how much better it will taste as a toast to something *I* have achieved. There is something to be said about a drink well earned.

Captain Sharpe is right—we are certainly going to celebrate tonight.

Out on deck in the morning, or whatever bloody hour it is that the sun shines directly overhead with absolutely no regard for common decency, my head is throbbing and my stomach is in a relentless state of distress. I woke once again on Captain Sharpe’s settee, but this time with no recollection of falling asleep there and without his disapproving stare looming over me. In fact, I’m fairly certain he *allowed* me to sleep there, which is ludicrous.

No, it’s not that ludicrous. It *is* his fault I’m in this morning fog, since we drank through dinnertime without a bite to eat. I can’t even remember what we were celebrating. I do remember the thrill of that first clink of glass against glass, and the warm, fluttering loop in my belly at the way Captain Sharpe smiled at me as I drank to our toast. Like I meant something—like I had done something worthwhile.

The memory of that feeling alone is enough to make the ensuing bottle ache well worth it.

“Aren’t ye lookin’ fancy this mornin’?”

The skin at the back of my neck ripples into gooseflesh at the voice grating on my skull. I groan a little and rub at my temples. “Am I?” I grumble as I turn to Renard, who is standing in front of my work table with his arms crossed, peering at me with a look on his face I am not sober enough to translate.

“Ye weren’t at dinner, er in yer bunk last night. An’ again at breakfast, missin’.”

“I wasn’t missing; I knew exactly where I was.” That’s only partly a lie.

Renard snorts and waves away whichever twin is sitting next to me to take his spot. A guilty pang tugs at my chest. I can’t even remember which twin joined me today. A glance at the loose queue at the back of his head as he hurries away reminds me it was Tristan. Poor Tristan. I’ll have to apologize to him once I don’t feel like hitting the first thing that annoys me.

“Ye drunk?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

Renard pulls his flask from his pocket and pushes it into my hand. I groan a little in appreciation as I untwist the cap and bring it to my lips. The liquid inside burns going down, but a few swallows later I do feel a little better. I cough as I hand the flask back.

“What is that?”

“Rum.”

“My ass.”

Renard laughs and pockets his flask. “It’s no’ expensive rum.”

I squint at him and he grins back at me. “I appreciate the hair of the dog anyway,” I say.

“What got ye so crawsick, anyway? Ye barely touched the—what d’ye call it?—swill from the galley.”

I click my tongue in amusement and rub at my face. “I worked late on the books, and the captain shared a bottle or three with me.”

“Did he, now?” Renard asks, brows rising slowly. “Why’d he go an’ do that?”

I wrinkle up my nose and sit back as I try to recall. “You know,” I say finally, “I can’t remember. Or maybe he didn’t tell me . . . I can’t remember that, either.”

“What’s the matter, rich boys can’t hold their liquor?”

I chuckle, though in truth, I’m not amused by his comment. “I can hold it just fine, and I’m not rich anymore.”

“Nae?” he asks, and I can tell by his expression he’s assessing my clothes.

I look down at myself and frown. I’ve dressed in my cravat, waistcoat, and jacket again this morning without truly intending to do so. I must have dressed using nothing but muscle memory, for my waistcoat isn’t quite the correct shade of green for the brown trousers I’m wearing. What was I thinking?

“Damnation . . . ,” I mutter, adjusting my jacket. “I thought it felt unreasonably hot today.”

“Yer still pissed.”

“I most certainly am not,” I insist, then groan as I rub once again at my temples. “Though skipping dinner was probably unwise.”

“Mmm . . . drinkin’ weth the cap’n maybe wasn’t all that wise either. Especially if ye cannae even remember anythin’ from it. Did he tell ye why we’ve changed course?”

I blink, for that sounds familiar. “Have we?”

“Oh aye, last night as we were messin’ belowdecks. We all felt the shift.”

“Where are we headed now?”

“Due south.”

As if that means anything to me. I frown at him. “I assume we were not headed in that direction before?”

Renard shakes his head at me and closes his eyes as if I am trying his patience. “How did ye survive this long, Kit?”

“At the behest of others,” I mutter as I slouch in my rickety chair. “Which *way* were we headed before?”

“Southwest, toward St. Augustine.”

“And what’s south of us now?” I ask.

“A few places.”

I don’t have to ask again, because the look I give him is enough to make him grin and answer me properly.

“Cuba . . . an’ Jamaica.”

Jamaica. Why does that sound familiar? “Should that mean something to me? I feel as if you’re hinting at something, but I’m not sober enough to follow. I hardly even know what day it is.”

“Port Royal is where Jeffrey Reuter vanished. We haven’t been back since. The men’re spooked by it.”

A chill slithers down my spine as I recall what Renard told me about the previous scribe’s mysterious disappearance. All at once I remember last night’s conversation with Captain Sharpe, about the possibility that Mr. Reuter may have been stealing from him.

“An’ it’s July the thirty-first.”

This addition is a direct blow to my gut. I am not sure I can keep from retching much longer. “Ah,” is all I manage as I pull myself to my feet. “I . . . I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Ye do that,” Renard says as he watches me. “Let me ken when ye do, I’m dyin’ ta ken.”

I take up my quill and the ledger and nod without looking back. I need to find Captain Sharpe and get him to fill in some of these blanks. But first I need to get out of this sun—and out from under Renard’s watchful eye.

“All right there, Kitten?”

No, I am most assuredly *not* all right.

I move my arm from my eyes and open them to blink blearily up at Captain Sharpe as he leans over me. Haloed by the orange light of the sunset, he’s more beautiful than ever.

Sunset?

The last thing I remember, I was sitting down on the settee to resume my deep dive into the disreputable misadventures of one Mr. Jeffrey Reuter. How has an entire afternoon passed so quickly? I push myself into a sitting position, and regret washes over me as my head spins and my stomach does a terrible little lurch. I groan and lie back once more.

“Apparently not . . . ,” Captain Sharpe mutters as his shadow crosses over me. I don’t watch where he’s going; I am too focused on not retching all over the rug under the settee.

Then a warm hand cups the back of my neck, and he draws me up into a sitting position once more before I can protest. Moments later there is a cool glass against my lips, and the sweet taste of port flows over my tongue.

Reason dictates that juice or water might be better for sobering me up, but I am not reasonable and this is a pirate ship. I take the glass and drink down more than I should in one gulp, before lowering it with a sigh. “Is it still July the thirty-first?”

Captain Sharpe laughs as he sits beside me on the settee. “Since this morning.”

I frown and turn to him. “Today is my eighteenth birthday.”

He isn’t expecting that. Truly, I hadn’t even meant to say it out loud, but I am so grateful for the glass of port in my hands that right now I might just tell him anything.

“Is it, now?” he asks. He’s too clever to make the mistake of wishing me well.

“Strange, isn’t it?”

“Not that strange.”

“I’m supposed to be married.”

“What . . . right now?” he asks. I see he’s poured himself a glass as well, and he leans back as he sips from it.

“The day I boarded your ship.”

He chokes a bit and sits upright. “You jilted your bride on her wedding day?”

I nod and don’t even have the good grace to grimace or look ashamed. I’m not ashamed; I still think I did right by her in leaving that day. “She’s better off.”

“I’m sure she is,” Captain Sharpe says. I can tell by the smirk on his face that he isn’t trying to insult me, and I offer him a reluctant laugh in response. “This answers quite a few questions I had about your unusual decision to board my ship.”

“Not all of them, I’m sure.”

“No,” he agrees. “Not all. But many. Well . . . since you’re drunk already—”

“Nearly sober,” I correct, though he ignores me.

“—and it’s your birthday, we may as well keep drinking and celebrate.”

I’m not opposed; truly, the promise of a few hours of oblivion on the most cursed day of a year is enough to convince me. I take another sip of my wine and set the glass down. “Very well, but if we’re going to drink all night, this time let’s get some food in our bellies first.”

Sharpe laughs and pats me on the back before getting to his feet. “I’ll have something brought up,” he says as he makes his way across the cabin to open the door. I watch as he leans out, shifting his weight until he sees someone. “Trevor, bring up a plate for me.”

“Aye, Cap’n,” I hear Trevor say, then the captain is back inside the cabin, the door shut behind him.

I work loose the knot on my cravat and slide it off, then drop it onto the settee beside me. The room slowly brightens as Captain Sharpe moves around his cabin lighting candles one by one. By the time he returns to the settee, I have slid out of my jacket.

“By all means, make yourself comfortable,” he says with a smirk.

“If I’m to get drunk, I won’t be doing it in a fine silk jacket,” I point out as I pick up my glass and sip from it once more.

Two hours later I am warm and drunk as I lounge on the settee. The platter of meat, cheese, and stale bread Trevor brought up has been reduced

to mostly crumbs. I have stripped off my shoes and stockings, and my waistcoat hangs open as I cradle a fresh glass of port, swirling it to admire the legs of the liquor (even if I can barely see them in the dim candlelight).

This is our second bottle. We promised each other that the first bottle would be all—and then Captain Sharpe popped the cork on yet another and refilled my glass. He, too, is tipsy. He's still in shoes and stockings, but his jacket is on the floor, and his shirt is no longer tucked into the waist of his trousers. He sits in the armchair across from his settee, where I am comfortably lounging.

He's also been making eyes at me for the last hour. Or perhaps it is I who has been making eyes at him. I'm not sure, but I'm enjoying it all the same.

"Tell me more about your betrothed."

"Why?" I ask, knowing the whine in my voice makes me sound like a petulant child.

Captain Sharpe chuckles and brings his glass to his lips. "Because you're making eyes at me, so either you're thinking about her or you're too drunk to think straight . . . or you're thinking about *me*, which would mean you *are* too drunk to think straight."

I laugh, and we both drink. "Yes," I agree, before bringing my glass to my lips again and finishing off the last sip. I lick my lips and set the glass down, then move to lie across the settee once more. "There isn't much to say about her."

"I'm sure that isn't true."

"Well . . . I don't know much about her."

"Ah. That's more honest," Captain Sharpe says.

I squint, beginning to suspect he is far less drunk than I, but I am too drunk to be sure. I wrinkle my nose and shrug. "She's pretty—a few years my junior. Honestly, I think I'd rather talk about how you think I'm making eyes at you."

"I'm sure you would."

“I believe it’s *you* making eyes at *me*, Captain Sharpe.”

His eyes glimmer, and the smile on his face changes somehow. “I’m sure you do.”

“Aren’t you?” I ask, grinning. “I wouldn’t blame you. I’ve been told I’m very nice to look at.”

He laughs again, but it’s a quiet sort of laugh, deep in his chest. “That you are, Kitten . . .”

“Good. Let’s talk more about that. I love hearing about how pretty I am.”

“You’re drunk.”

“I’m very drunk,” I agree.

“You’re too drunk. Tell me about your betrothed.”

I groan a little, draping a theatrical arm across my forehead. “You’re no fun.”

“I may be a pirate, but I’m a gentleman,” he insists.

“How dull.”

He scoffs under his breath and leans against the arm of his chair in a way that is lazy, controlled, and beautiful. God, how I wish he weren’t a gentleman in this moment. I wish he would take advantage of my drunkenness and just kiss me. I bet his lips are softer than they appear.

“Stop.”

“Stop what?” I whine.

“You know exactly what you’re doing, Kitten.”

I shiver a little but pout as I lower my arm from my forehead. “I can’t look at you?”

“You can look, but I can tell by the expression on your face you think you’ll get much more than that.”

I sigh dramatically and sit up, then haul myself to my feet so quickly, I sway and stumble into the table, just barely catching myself on it before I hit the floor.

Perfect.

“I’m going to bed,” I announce.

Captain Sharpe is on his feet behind me; I can tell by the way his shadow moves as I stumble toward the door.

“You aren’t leaving my cabin in this state,” he says as he comes up behind me to take me by the shoulders. His hands are firm and strong, and I am even more aware of how much drunker I am than him.

“You can’t change your mind now that you’ve rejected me.”

He laughs as he guides me back toward the settee. “I haven’t changed my mind. You’ll fall overboard and drown.” I stumble, and he hooks an arm around my waist to stop me from going down. “On second thought, I’ll sleep on the settee. I fear you’ll roll off and smack your pretty head on the floor. You can have my bed . . . just this once.”

“Such a gentleman,” I say in a mock-swoony voice. Or maybe I really am swooning; it’s hard for me to tell my own mind right now.

“I told you so.” His voice is soft beside my ear, and I shiver against him. I know he feels it, for his body goes rigid and he tightens his hold on my waist just a little bit. “Get into bed, Kitten.”

I’m losing control of the situation somehow. I reach out for his bed and allow him to help me climb up into it. It’s a struggle to sit on it without face-planting into the blankets, and I’m sure that when I turn to face him, it’s with as much grace as a newborn colt, but I manage it without retching in his face or falling off the bed—which is a small sort of accomplishment.

“Don’t complain to me if you regret turning me down in the morning.”

He smiles at me as he draws the lower curtain closed. “I won’t.”

“You won’t regret it?”

“I won’t complain.”

“Good. I’d much prefer that you *did* regret it, but I daresay listening to you complain about it would be so very unattractive.”

He laughs and leans against the bed frame with his arms crossed. “Would it, now? How unromantic of you.”

“Romance is for ladies and children’s stories,” I point out as I struggle to get under the blankets.

“Is it? What kind of love story do you prefer, then, Kitten—if not arranged marriages or forbidden romance?”

“I think we’re talking about two very different things, Captain.” I sigh once I’m under the blankets. I decide it’s far too hot in my trousers. I wriggle out of them and toss them onto the floor.

Captain Sharpe watches this with brows raised and eyes wide, then looks back to my face. “Are we?”

“You’re talking about love. I’m talking about lust. You’re too romantic for your own good.”

“Maybe I am,” Captain Sharpe says, his voice softening as he smiles at me. “Sounds like you aren’t interested in love at all. Are highborn lads not allowed to fall in love?”

“We’re allowed, I suppose. Not many of us do. But either way, it doesn’t matter.”

“Why’s that, Kitten?”

“I’m unlovable,” I say matter-of-factly as I lie back against the pillows.

“What makes you say that?” he asks. I can hear the frown in his voice even as I close my eyes, but I can’t understand why he’s frowning.

“Because . . .” I trail off as sleep begins to pull at me. “I killed my mother when she gave birth to me, so I’m cursed to live a loveless life.”

There is a long stretch of silence, and I’m quite sure I have fallen asleep, until I hear Captain Sharpe speak again.

“Who told you that, Kitten?”

“My father,” I sigh. “People don’t love pretty boys like me. They use us up and leave us when they’re done. I’m no good.” I open my eyes then and turn my head to gaze up at him.

I can’t make sense of the look on his face as he stares at me. It’s an unfamiliar expression—one I have never seen before on anyone. I swallow hard, because the way he’s staring at me somehow makes it hard to breathe.

I can’t make sense of that, either. Before I can stop myself, I blurt, “He’s never touched me, you know. Not once.”

“Your father?” Captain Sharpe asks, and his voice sounds nearly as strangled as mine.

I nod, because I can’t seem to speak. Not until I’ve taken a few shaky breaths. “Not even in anger.”

The captain’s jaw tightens. I know by the set of his mouth, even though I cannot see his skin pulled taut under his beard. I can tell he’s having some kind of inner struggle, but that, too, doesn’t make sense.

“Kit—”

“As a child, when I reached for him . . . he would pull away, like I might burn him, and call for the governess.” There is something hot and wet sliding back into my hair, creating a puddle under my ear on the pillow. “Why would he do that?” I ask in a whisper.

I don’t know why I’m asking *him*. I don’t know why my chest aches like I cannot breathe. I don’t know why my throat is so tight and sore. It’s all so unusual, and the way Captain Sharpe is staring at me makes me feel ridiculous and small . . .

And *seen*.

“Go to sleep, Kitten,” he whispers.

I nod, because what else can I do? I roll onto my side and close my eyes, a wet heat dampening my lashes as I do.

I can hear his breath hitch beside me, but if Captain Sharpe says anything after that, I don’t hear it. I do hear the curtain beside my head slide closed, and then . . . nothing.

Until the cannon fire.

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Fourteen

It’s well past noon—I can tell by the position of the sun as I burst through the doors of the captain’s cabin and march out on deck like I own the place. In fact, I think it may be quite late. I’m a little alarmed Captain Sharpe let me sleep for so long.

“How dare you board my vessel? Have you the slightest inkling of who I am?” I demand.

Seven guns seem a tad much to be aimed at one person—especially when that person is me. I appear to have startled the men who boarded us. I stare down the barrels pointed at me in the silence following my outburst, ignoring the itch of Captain Sharpe’s gaze boring into the back of my skull.

They are most definitely French; I can see that now as I stand mere feet from them. French is good—they are less likely to know my father but will still understand the importance of his title. I look from man to man, trying to maintain my air of haughty disgust and infuse it with a hint of aristocratic rage. Finally, I lock gazes with an officer, turning to him and raising one brow expectantly.

“Eh, bien?” I demand. I hope my French isn’t rusty—I want them to be intimidated. “Vous, monsieur! Je suis Christopher-Henry Davenport, fils du

vicomte de Falmouth. Vous perturbez ma tournée des continents!”

He seems unmoved by my complaints.

“Is my French not clear enough?” I demand when he doesn’t respond. “You are disrupting my tour! If my father, the viscount, hears how the French navy boarded the vessel he carefully procured, then bullied his only son and heir, he will bring his complaints to the crown prince himself!” I slide my father’s ring off my first finger and hold it out to him as proof of my identity.

This gets some reaction. The guns trained on me slacken, and the men turn their gazes to their officer, who is glaring at me now. I am grateful to past Kit for having the sense to steal this ring off my father’s desk months ago.

“Your French is perfect, Lord Davenport.” That’s something no one has ever accused me of before. “You must forgive me . . .” He steps forward to see the ring, and I take advantage of the pause in his speech to interject.

“*Must* I?”

I’m sure he winces, but he recovers from it well. He stops a few feet from me and takes my ring. His frown deepens, but when he hands the ring back, all seven guns drop to the men’s sides. “You must forgive me,” he repeats carefully. “We were not made aware of an official tour. We have only just begun a parley with your captain. You are on the king’s business, then?”

I scoff and slide the ring carefully back onto my finger, because I need time to come up with a response. I hadn’t realized we were in the midst of a parley. I do hope I haven’t muffed it up. Captain Sharpe moves into my peripheral vision, and I take a mere second to glance his way. He’s crossed his arms and is looking like he wants to throttle me and kiss me at the same time.

“I’m on no one’s business but my own,” I say with a sneer. “I am nobility, not an errand boy. This tour was meant to be my last hurrah after Eton, before settling into married life. Surely you are familiar with the concept of a tour? Or can your nobility not afford such standard luxuries?

Perhaps young Frenchmen must settle for a measly prenuptial feast at home?”

The officer is offended now. I can tell by the way his brow twitches and his fist clenches. He wants to punch me. Good. I’d prefer to annoy him into letting us alone, as this half-baked “plan” of mine certainly doesn’t hold any water.

“Shall I fetch my papers as well?” I ask, turning back toward the captain’s cabin to remind him of where I emerged. Why *else* would I be sleeping in the captain’s cabin, were I not the person in charge on this ship?

Why else, indeed.

“Non, monsieur, that will not be necessary,” he says, exasperation clear. “Your crest is proof enough.”

I face him and lift my chin again. All this moving around is starting to make me queasy. “You have disturbed my crew.” I glance around at the men, and—*good God*—I hope I hide my alarm well enough. What the hell are they dressed as?

Renard is wearing a suit I can tell isn’t the best quality, but it’s still strange to see him looking so sharp. Billy stands beside him in some sort of ill-fitting livery. What on earth? I even glimpse someone in a *dress*. Who is that? “A-and my guests,” I stammer, hoping he doesn’t notice how my voice cracks.

He has no answer. Thank Christ. I watch as he takes a steadying breath, continuing on before he can speak.

“If you disembark immediately and leave us be, I may not press charges upon my return home.”

“Press charges? Mons—”

“The Crown Prince of England is my fiancée’s godfather, *monsieur*,” I snap at him. I can hear men murmuring behind me. I didn’t want to give so much away, but I need these Frenchmen off this ship before my charade falls apart. And before I retch up the food and wine going sour in my belly.

“Do you think he would take kindly to the French navy shooting at his goddaughter’s future husband? It sounds like a declaration of war to me.”

“W-war? Monsieur,” he splutters. “Please be—”

“If you are about to ask me to be reasonable, I suggest you hold your tongue and return to your ship. I may not be armed, but my captain is, and I am not above having him shoot you in the kneecap if you annoy me further.”

He clamps his mouth shut, and Captain Sharpe’s laugh from behind me nearly makes me lose my cool. I cross my arms to keep from laughing myself—or from falling over, whichever comes first—and the officer glowers at us both. At first I think he will not leave. My stomach twists in my gut as I stare at him, trying to look annoyed and unafraid.

By some miracle, he seems irritated enough by my behavior to give up his persecution of the crew. He shouts a few orders in French, and his men fall in line beside him. I keep my arms crossed, my brow raised menacingly, as I watch them caucus.

Before the officer leaves, he turns his gaze upon me once more and offers me an unfriendly smile. “Very well, my lord,” he says. His accent is truly grating on my nerves. “We will escort you to port, to prevent any further molestation to your vessel.”

The entire crew seems to tense up. Or is it just me? I squint and frown. “I’m sure that won’t be necessary.”

“Oh, no—I must insist. The son of an English viscount? I could not possibly let anything happen to you. I will leave two of my men in your service for the remainder of the voyage. You are heading for Port-au-Prince, are you not?”

I’m about to ask, *Are we?* when Captain Sharpe steps forward to stand beside me. “Yes, as I told you before Lord Davenport joined us on deck.”

I do my best not to appear surprised by this information. I’m truly beginning to regret stepping out on deck at all. What will we do if these Frenchmen remain on the *Deliverance*? Surely, we’ll all be killed.

“It is settled, then,” the French officer says. He motions to two of his men, giving them their instructions in French as I turn toward Captain Sharpe.

Without moving his head, he glances back to the cabin door with one raised brow, as if to dismiss me.

I take the hint. “I’m going inside,” I announce, trying to sound petulant. (I’m fairly good at that.) “It’s far too hot out here in the sun.”

“I am sure we will meet again, Lord Davenport, Viscount of Falmouth,” the French officer sneers.

I keep my expression carefully neutral as Sharpe and his men stare at me, dumbfounded. Then I return the officer’s sneer with one of my own, not bothering to hide my irritation as I march back toward the captain’s cabin.

I could do this. I could be a pirate—a *real* one. With this small victory, I feel a little invincible. Something I almost recognize as hubris wells up in my chest as I cross the deck.

But like Icarus and his waxen wings, I can feel the heart-thrumming thrill from my little performance fading as I near the cabin door, and my heart is pounding against my ribs loudly enough to drown out whatever Captain Sharpe says as I walk away.

I slam the door behind me as he volleys with the French officer. I don’t even hear him enter the cabin, for I am in a full panic now. Maybe I’m not as cut out for this as I hoped. My heart may just break through my rib cage at this point. I can’t seem to catch my breath.

Then, all at once, he is grasping my shoulders and hauling me back to my feet. I hadn’t even realized I was on the floor.

“Kitten.” Captain Sharpe’s voice is soft against the back of my ear. “Breathe. We’re all right. It was nicely done.”

If I *could* breathe, I would. But as I try to take control of my breathing, last night’s bad decisions come bubbling back up into my throat and I promptly vomit on the floor—and Captain Sharpe’s boots.

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When I wake in my bed, I am grateful the lingering nightmare of my accidentally becoming a pirate has ended. I roll onto my side and pull the pillows close. There is something perfect about pressing your face into the cool side of a pillow first thing in the morning. In this moment nothing can bother me.

That is, until a hand lands on my shoulder and shakes me alert. I lift my head with a jolt and stare at the blur of red and blue in front of me. I squint, and a pair of breasts come slowly into focus.

Wait—where am I? Have I got blackout drunk in a brothel? I blink a few more times and lift my gaze to the face attached to those breasts. All at once the bliss of sleeping in my own bed on the cool side of my pillow crashes down around me. I am staring into familiar twin faces.

“Mr. Kit?”

It is Tristan who speaks first. It was *Tristan* whom I saw out on deck in a blue dress. It was *Tristan’s breasts* I was admiring only a moment ago. I sit up abruptly, throwing off the covers.

It’s a mistake.

I sway as the cabin begins to spin. Before I can turn away and retch once more, Tristan's cool hand is on my forehead and a mug is pushed at me. I don't think, I just drink. And I'm stunned to realize it's water running over my tongue. Cool water, with a strange flavor of petrichor, that's refreshing in a way water has never been before. I drink it down entirely, then lower the mug and stare at the twins.

What. Is going. On?

"Tristan, what are you *wearing*?" I finally manage, my gaze dropping once more to the bodice of his dress. "Have you *breasts* under there?"

"We had to look the part of a merchant vessel," Trevor says protectively as Tristan crosses his arms over his chest.

I frown and set the empty mug on the bedclothes. "And this is what you came up with?"

"No one expects a lady on a pirate ship," Tristan says in his defense.

I suppose that's true.

"I can't believe you've been hiding breasts from me all this time," I grumble as I get to my feet. Tristan's shoulders slacken, and he smiles at me in a way that is somehow both confused and appreciative. "Blue is not your color. You're better suited to green and tan."

He lets out a puff of laughter then, dropping his arms altogether. "Convincin', though, ain't I?"

"Aren't you," I correct.

"That too."

I eye him suspiciously. "I suppose this shade of blue isn't all that bad."

"Mr. Kit, we haven't much time," Trevor interjects. "Cap'n Sharpe is gone."

"*Gone?*" I ask, fairly alarmed. "Gone where?" This is a ship—where could he possibly have gone to?

"The French frigate took him as their *guest*."

I frown, stepping between them to move into the center of the cabin. They are beginning to crowd me, and I need room to think and breathe. It is then I notice my rather marked lack of shoes. I stare down at my stockings, and the confrontation on deck comes flooding back in a series of short flashes: Me bashing through the door of Sharpe's cabin. Me yelling at the French navy. Me outing myself to everyone on board as the heir to the viscountcy of Falmouth. Me vomiting on Captain Sharpe's cabin floor while he had his arms around me.

Oh Christ. I didn't just vomit on the floor. No, I distinctly recall retching on *his boots*. How humiliating. I allow my gaze to drift to the spot, but it has been cleaned up. By whom I cannot tell, but I turn to the twins sheepishly. "Right . . ."

"Are ye really a viscount?" Tristan asks.

"Should we call ye Lord Davenport?" Trevor counters.

"Ah . . . no, and . . . no," I say. "My father is a viscount, and I am just . . . Kit."

"But yer not," Trevor insists.

"What happens when we get to port?" I ask, to change the topic.

Trevor frowns. "We all hang, unless the French believed yer story."

"Why wouldn't they?" I ask, holding out my hand with my father's ring still on it. "I offered them proof."

"They wouldn't have taken the cap'n if they had," Tristan explains.

I deflate and sink down onto the settee. "This is my fault, isn't it?"

"Well, only partly," Trevor offers helpfully. I jerk my head up, and I can tell by his expression he is surprised by my surprise at his agreement.

"I beg your—"

"*You* said it!" he says.

I huff and look at Tristan, who is watching us both with a thoughtful frown. "Well," he says, "they might have believed us if cap'n had got the chance to show a letter of marque. When ye came burstin' out on deck, he had to change course."

“Ah.” Well, *that* certainly hadn’t been my intention. “Never mind all that,” I say, because I still hate being blamed for anything, even if it *is* my fault. “How do we get him back?”

Tristan’s eyes widen. “Get him back?”

Trevor, however, is grinning. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Not an hour later Tristan, Trevor, Mr. Tydes, and I are huddled around the low table in front of the settee. Tristan is still in his blue dress, and I cannot help but glance down as he leans over the table to snatch up a slice of bread. Trevor elbows me in the side—something he wouldn’t have dared to do mere hours earlier. Still, I jerk my attention away from his twin’s bodice to look at him instead.

He raises his eyebrows in a kind of protective warning, and I am reminded once more of how much I truly like the twins. Even if he is glaring at me for leering at his twin brother, there is a comradery between us that did not exist before this moment. “I’m just—”

“Peerin’ down his dress,” Trevor interrupts helpfully.

I blush, dear Christ. I actually *blush*. An uncomfortable heat rushes to my cheeks as I sit up straight. “I didn’t mean to,” I say. “They’re *staring* at me.”

“I can’t change until the Frenchmen are dealt with,” Tristan grumbles through a mouthful of bread. Breasts or no, he’s the same Tristan who sits beside me most mornings, learning to read my filthy novel and occasionally stealing bits of food from my plate.

“Right.” I nod and sit back on the settee. “So what are we to do?”

Mr. Tydes frowns. “I can’t stay in here much longer,” he reminds us. “They’ll start to wonder why I’m serving you tea.”

“I assure you they won’t,” I reply. I’ve been on my fair share of pleasure barges. “It’s customary for the captain to invite the highest-ranking

passengers to sup with him. It's only fitting you should sup with us in his stead." Technically, it should be Billy here and not Mr. Tydes . . . but Billy has disguised himself as a servant on deck.

Mr. Tydes narrows his eyes, but he doesn't argue. He's had the same irritated creases in his brow since he joined us with a platter of meat, cheese, and bread after I sent Trevor out to retrieve him. Though, to be fair, he always seems to have those creases around me. "Then, we need to make a plan. We'll reach Port-au-Prince by morning at this speed."

I nod and rub the tip of my finger across my lips. "It's nearly full dark out. We need to dispatch the Frenchmen before we can do anything about getting Captain Sharpe back."

"Yer becomin' a true pirate, Mr. Kit," Trevor points out, smiling like something is funny.

I narrow my eyes, not sure whether he's poking fun at me or just pleased with this turn of events. Either way, I choose not to dignify his comment with a direct response. "Tristan can distract them. I've never known a Frenchman to turn down the chance to stare down a lady's dress."

"I'm not a lady!" Tristan snaps.

I shoot him a silencing glare. "They don't know that," I whisper. "And keep your voice down."

Tristan clamps his mouth shut and nods, relaxing once more. "Sorry. How am I to distract 'em?"

I consider for a moment how to explain what I expect him to do, then smile mischievously. "Page two hundred and ten," I suggest.

Instantly Tristan reddens, and I am pleased beyond measure that he remembers exactly which scene of my filthy novel I am referring to.

"I can't do that."

"You don't have to do *that*," I explain. "You just have to make them think you will."

"And then what?"

"Wait," Trevor says. "What are we talkin' about?"

I wave him off, still looking at Tristan. “Then Mr. Tydes and Trevor will wallop them over the head from behind and knock them out.”

“I’m too conspicuous; they’re watching me,” Mr. Tydes points out. “I’ll get Renard to go with you. This is his field of expertise.”

I don’t love the way he said that, but it’s fine with me, though I see Trevor and Tristan exchange frowns. I’m just glad Mr. Tydes agrees with me for once. “Very well, then, Renard will wallop them over the head.”

“It would be easier to dispatch ’em with a knife to the throat,” Trevor suggests, and I freeze.

I’ve forgotten where I am. I’ve forgotten what piracy truly means. Trevor, Tristan, Renard . . . even Captain Sharpe. They’ve all killed men before. I’ve seen the blood on their clothes; I’ve seen the weapons they keep. They aren’t playing at being pirates, like I am. They are the real thing. All at once I’m not sure I can go through with this plan, not if it means murder.

Trevor must understand what I am thinking by whatever expression he sees on my face. He frowns, but not in disappointment or disgust. He puts a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, Mr. Kit. Ye won’t have to look.”

I sigh and shake my head. “I . . . we can’t slit their throats,” I argue. Before anyone can ask me why, the reason plops into my lap and relief floods over me. “We need their uniforms to get around on the frigate. If they’re covered in blood, we’ll raise alarm bells.”

Trevor’s eyes widen as he looks at Tristan and Mr. Tydes, who are both staring at me with their brows raised, like they’re shocked I had the brains to think of that.

I scowl at them. “We’ll have to knock them out somehow so we can take the uniforms. And once we do, we can take the skiff across to the frigate in the shadow of night.”

“It’s a new moon,” Mr. Tydes says, his eyes still wide, though he isn’t staring at me now. He’s staring through me as he considers the plan. “If

you’re quiet enough, they won’t see you coming. You can sneak on board and find Captain Sharpe.”

Trevor sets something in my hand. It’s cold and heavy, and I drop my gaze to see a pistol lying there. I jerk my head back up, alarmed. “What’s this?”

“It’s not loaded, Mr. Kit,” he promises. “No offense . . . but I don’t trust ye with a loaded pistol. But *they* won’t know it isn’t loaded.”

I swallow hard and nod, getting to my feet. “I’m . . . going to change into something less . . .” I motion at the bright color of my waistcoat. “Conspicuous.”

“I’ll get Renard,” Mr. Tydes mutters.

I make quick work of my clothes, switching into black and navy blue so I might blend better into the velvety dark of the ocean on a moonless night. I slip my father’s ring back into my purse, not wanting to risk losing it now that I’ve come to realize how helpful it can be.

By the time I am dressed, Renard is in the cabin, speaking softly to Mr. Tydes. He lifts his head as I approach and smirks at me. Apparently, they’ve told him the plan, and he approves. Good—I’m too antsy to try to convince anyone of anything. “Ready?” I ask, sliding the pistol into the waistband of my trousers as I’ve seen other men do.

Mr. Tydes lifts a brow at me. “Never the front of your trousers,” he says, motioning to where I’ve hidden the unloaded pistol. “You’ll shoot your bollocks off.”

Tristan hides a laugh behind a cough, and I wrinkle up my nose. “It’s not loaded.”

“Put it in the back anyway. One day you may have need of a loaded pistol, and if you do it wrong the first time, you’ll do it wrong again.”

I roll my eyes but do as he says, taking the pistol out and pushing it into the back of my waistband instead. It sticks into the small of my back, but I don’t complain.

Once that's done, Mr. Tydes nods and picks up the wooden platter. "Good," he says. "Let's go."

And just like that, we are stepping out of the captain's cabin. It's full dark now. I take Tristan's arm like I might have taken Kitty's and lead him toward the port rail. We make sure to pass the two Frenchmen, who stand silent and armed—waiting, it would seem, for an excuse to shoot one of us.

I pay them no mind, though my heart is racing. I've done plenty of immoral things in my life—but breaking the law in *front* of a soldier is quite a new experience for me.

"I thought we'd never shake your brother," I say to Tristan, just a little too loud.

Tristan blinks at me, and I can't tell if he's playacting or if he really has no idea what I'm talking about. Either way, it's effective. I press him to the rail with my body, and he gives an unladylike grunt that almost sends me pealing with laughter. I duck my head beside his to hide my expression and hope it looks like I'm whispering sweet nothings into his ear, when something cold and hard nudges my arm.

Thank Christ, they've intervened before I have to kiss Tristan. That would have been terribly awkward—like kissing my brother. I haven't a brother, but I imagine Tristan and Trevor are the closest I'll ever come to it. Kissing one's own brother is a step too far, even for me. I turn to the Frenchman who has had the gall to nudge a member of the peerage with the tip of his musket. "Excuse me, *sir*," I demand.

"Take your illicit tryst elsewhere, monsieur," he orders with a nod.

I step back, my arm still hooked around Tristan's waist. "How dare you interrupt us. I—"

I don't need to say anything more, nor does Tristan need to re-create page 210. The Frenchman facing us whips around to see Trevor strangling his companion with a length of rope. Before he can sound the alarm or shoot someone, I jump into action.

On pure instinct, I release Tristan and pull out the pistol, slamming the butt of it down onto the Frenchman's skull with a sickening crack. He crumples instantly, and I am left staring at him with wide eyes as Trevor struggles with his own prey.

For a moment nobody moves. (That is, nobody but the Frenchman trying to squirm free of the rope.) I forget how to breathe entirely until I lift my gaze to see his face turning blue. It is a swift reminder to inhale, and so I do, taking a step back as I watch him drop lifelessly to the deck beside his unconscious partner.

I swallow hard and glance up at Trevor. I have never seen a man killed before. Not in front of my own eyes. I am relieved to see that he doesn't appear smug or satisfied. He doesn't have the wicked look of a murderer. Instead he's focused and frowning as Renard comes to help him haul the two men back into the captain's cabin, where we might divest them of their uniforms.

My blood is like ice in my veins as I follow behind. Tristan has disappeared—to finally change out of that dress, I assume. My mind is racing as I shut the cabin door behind me and hurry to help Trevor with the buttons of the French uniforms.

That's when I see Renard has wrapped the length of rope around the other man's neck and is squeezing, hard. My stomach drops, and the world slides out of focus.

"What are you doing?" I gasp. "He's already unconscious!"

Renard looks me square in the eyes as he twists the rope tighter. "Dead men tell nae tales."

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It’s madness, what we are doing here. I am terrified as we row silently against the wake of the French naval frigate. In some severe lapse of judgement, Trevor handed me an oar when we first lowered the skiff into the water. I didn’t even argue with him; I *actually* attempted to row, watching Trevor’s movements and doing my best to copy him. It is no easy feat, with my legs spread wide on either side of the crossbow Renard insisted we bring. I try not to think about what it will be needed for as I row, wincing at the sound of water splashing each time the oar strikes the surface. Surely, this can’t be right—we’ll most certainly be heard.

Moments later Renard slaps the back of my head—*rude*—and yanks the oar from my hands. I give it up without complaint.

“Ye’ll wake the entire navy,” he growls from behind me.

It’s just as well, for my nerves are shot. My blood is thundering in my ears so loud, I’m sure it alone will alert every man on board to our approach. I try to distract myself from the pitch-black waves rippling around our tiny skiff. I don’t even realize I am staring until Tristan kicks my shin.

I jump and grab at my leg, glaring at him.

“Stop starin’ at ’em,” he hisses at me, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I *wasn’t*,” I hiss back. He isn’t even *in* the blasted dress anymore. There’s nothing *to* stare at!

But I am grateful for the distraction from my terror. I shift in the boat carefully, leaning closer to Tristan. “Are we going to talk about it?” I ask, keeping my voice low.

“No,” Tristan says.

I frown a little, but I’m not going to pester him. I *like* Tristan, and though I am still nonplussed, I don’t want to ruin one of the first genuine friendships I have ever formed. I nod and sit upright. “All right.”

He seems surprised when I don’t press him further, but he offers nothing, and I don’t ask—just as he doesn’t press me about my father’s title.

“All right, lads,” Renard whispers as he gets to his feet, rocking the skiff in a way that makes my heart jump into my throat. I grip the sides of the little boat, even as I turn to watch him. He is wearing one of the dead men’s uniforms, and I am disturbed by the wrongness of seeing him in it.

He reaches a hand toward me, and for a moment I simply stare at him. Then I recall the weapon between my feet. I shift, gripping the sides of the skiff once more, then exhale as I manage to somehow lift the crossbow without knocking Tristan in the face.

Renard levels an annoyed look at me as he takes it. I don’t have time to sulk, though; he waves his hand at me and points to some kind of wooden lever at my feet. I hand it to him and watch in silent amazement as he uses the lever to force the string of the bow back. There is a click, and he drops the lever back into my arms and sets a bolt into the crossbow. All this is done quickly, with a silent grace, and I can only think about how long that would have taken me and how loud I would have been doing it. Thank goodness I was born with a pretty face and will never be in a position to need a weapon like that.

I make the mistake of following Renard’s gaze. We are close enough to the frigate now that I can see a guard moving slowly across the poop deck.

He has not seen us yet, but the torches on deck illuminate him even from this distance.

Trevor goes back to rowing quietly, and as we close in on the frigate, I hear the snick of the bolt being loosed. I close my eyes just in time to avoid seeing the man die, like the coward I am. Tristan's hand on mine is my signal to reopen them, and—bless him—he offers me a sympathetic smile before reaching over me to take the crossbow from Renard.

"Let's go, b'fore the second guard finds him," Renard says. He takes a grappling hook in his left hand and swings it around for a moment before tossing it up. It catches on the rail of the poop deck with a thunk, and we all freeze.

Silence.

The four of us exchange glances, but no one speaks. We all know our roles. It's Trevor who climbs up first. He, too, has donned a uniform. I hope his red hair won't give us away.

Tristan climbs up next, dressed in his usual black breeches and brown shirt. I swallow hard and stare at the rope. Now that it's my turn, I am all at once very aware of how high the poop deck is. "I can't do this," I whisper. "Leave me down here. I'll mind the skiff."

Renard gives me another look. He's tied the skiff to the end of the grappling hook's rope. No one needs to mind it, but I am too scared to move. He grabs me by the collar and hoists me up, and I nearly scream out of fear of falling over.

I must truly be the worst pirate ever.

He pushes me toward the rope and comes up behind me as I grab on to it. "I'm not strong enough," I whisper.

"Ye've been livin' on a ship fer near half a year, Kit. Yer no' a soft rich boy anymore."

I'm not sure whether he's trying to insult me or encourage me, but I frown at him and nod, gripping the rope tightly. When I look up, Tristan is staring down at me, one half of his face illuminated by the torch. His arm is

outstretched, ready to help me over the rail. I take a deep breath and haul myself up.

It's bloody difficult. That first pull is the hardest part, but Renard, bless him, lifts me up by the waist, and I am somehow able to get both feet onto the side of the ship. I do my best to climb the wobbly rope as I step along the side of the ship. I can do this. I can do this.

I slip and gasp loudly.

I *can't* do this.

I look down at Renard, absolutely petrified, but he's already climbing up behind me. All I can do now is keep going; if I fall, I'll send us both careening into the skiff again. It's a struggle and it takes me far too long, but I make it almost to the top, and then Tristan and Trevor grab me under my arms and drag me up on deck.

My landing isn't nearly as graceful as I would have liked, yet it's far more graceful than I could have expected. My feet are *almost* silent as they meet the deck planks.

I freeze as I stare down at the body of the guard Renard shot. His hair is so dark, it could almost be black. My eyes drift lower, and I see that the bolt went in through his left eye and lodged there. The contents of my stomach rise up into my throat as I stare at him. I'm quite sure I will vomit.

Abruptly, hands on my shoulders spin me around and push me against the rail. I recognize that grip as Tristan's. I lean over the rail and suck in a sharp breath as he rubs my back gently.

Then Renard swings himself over beside me, and I can hear him and Trevor lifting the body up and over the rail, dropping it into the ocean. I turn away as the man plummets into the pitch-black waters below.

"We've got nae time fer delicate sensibilities," Renard hisses in my ear.

I know he's right. I swallow back my virtue, knowing it has no place here tonight. I must get my head on straight, or I'll get us all killed—and that would put quite a damper on my future as a free bachelor. I turn to face

the group and nod, doing my best to avoid looking at the pool of blood behind Trevor.

“Right,” I manage.

It’s a calculated risk, but we leave the grappling hook on the rail and hope no one will notice it. We make our way on light feet to the stairs leading to the quarterdeck. Renard waves his arm to motion us down, and we all drop into a squat. He holds one hand up, then makes his way slowly down the stairs, as if he were the guard on patrol.

He disappears around a corner, and a moment later there is a soft thud, followed by a low whistle. I have no idea what that means, but Trevor springs into action. He descends the stairs, and Tristan and I watch from our spot at the top as his silhouette disappears and then reappears—dragging a body. Despite myself, I turn away as he pushes the man over the rail. He must wave us on, for Tristan taps my arm and leads me to the quarterdeck.

Renard is at the wheel, and there is light coming from the windows of the captain’s cabin behind him. Tristan and I both drop once more to the floor of the deck.

“Cap’n’s inside,” Renard whispers, staring ahead to avoid bringing attention to us. “Trevor, deal weth the guard on the fo’c’sle.”

Trevor says nothing, but he immediately turns toward the front of the ship and makes his way to the fo’c’sle in a slow saunter, gazing out at the water as he does. As I watch him, I realize, not for the first time, that I am wholly unprepared for this lifestyle. I turn to Tristan, and he reads my expression without my having to say a word. He smiles and nods toward the captain’s cabin, before crawling to crouch under the windows to the right of the door. I follow suit, crouching under the left-hand windows. There are cabins on either side of us as well, but no torches or candles burn inside either. The officers who belong to these cabins are either asleep or inside the captain’s quarters with Sharpe.

I risk a glance inside, tipping my head up to peek in. I haven’t time to get a good look, though, because the figure of a man is approaching the

door. I drop back down and press myself tightly to the wall. “Renard,” I whisper frantically. “Someone’s coming.”

He doesn’t react, but he must have heard me. The cabin door opens and nearly hits Tristan. I hold my breath and pray I won’t be seen as the French officer who volleyed with me on deck this afternoon steps out.

“Jean-Baptiste,” he calls. “Avec moi.” He motions to someone behind him, and another officer follows him out, letting the door swing to close itself as they make their way belowdecks.

I don’t think—I just reach out to snatch the knob before the door can fully close. As quickly and silently as I can, I round the door and slip inside. The latch clicks shut, but no one pays it any mind.

No one but Captain Sharpe.

He looks right at me, and though his posture doesn’t change, the glint in his eyes most certainly does. He’s sitting casually in a chair by the back galley windows, with two officers facing him. They hold guns, but they aren’t trained on Sharpe. They are merely a reminder of who is in charge.

What the devil have I got myself into?

I have to trust that Renard and the twins will do whatever they can to prevent anyone from coming back inside. Slowly I raise myself to my feet and pull the pistol out from the back of my waistband. I can see the way Sharpe’s gaze locks on to the gun as he speaks in perfect French to the men standing before him.

“Comment aimez-vous le météo?” he asks. I shouldn’t be surprised, but I am. I hesitate for only a moment, then turn the gun in my hand so I’m gripping the barrel instead. I don’t know how to do anything but knock men out with it.

One of the men snorts. “Il fait chaud,” he snaps, as if he hates the heat of the Caribbean. I can’t blame him, in that stuffy uniform.

I step closer and raise the pistol. It’s a mistake. My palms are sweaty, and the barrel slips out of my hand. I fumble to catch it before it hits the

floor, but in my panic I miss spectacularly, and the gun clatters to the planks with a deafening thud.

At once both men guarding Captain Sharpe swivel about. Before I can utter a word in my defense, one of them shouts, “Hé, vous!” and they both raise their guns directly at me.

This is now the second time today I have had Frenchmen point their guns at me. This time I am significantly less indignant about it. I raise my hands to eye level and stumble back a step as my mind scrambles in search of some excuse.

Thankfully, at least *one* of us is competent. I didn’t even see Captain Sharpe get to his feet, but there is a sickening snapping noise, and the guard closest to him crumples to the floor. Sharpe smirks at me, a mischievous glint in his eye that both terrifies and enthralls me.

The gun on me wheels about toward Sharpe, but he is ready for it. He grabs the barrel and yanks, knocking the Frenchman off balance. I realize I am, once again, being useless, and I thoughtlessly throw myself into the man’s back, grabbing him about the waist to tackle him to the floor.

He loses his grip on his weapon, and as I push myself onto my hands and knees over him, the butt of his gun comes slamming down into his temple. *Twice.* I grimace at the second blow, but before I have time to get to my feet, Sharpe grabs me by the collar as Renard did and yanks me up.

I’m getting a little sick of being treated like a rag doll.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” he asks, sounding a little too incredulous for my liking.

“They forced me to play rugby at Eton,” I explain, smoothing out my trousers.

“You’re brave, Kitten—I’ll give you that,” he says as he thrusts me toward the door. I hear him toss the Frenchman’s gun to the floor, and as I glance back over my shoulder, I see him scoop up the gun I dropped instead.

The instant I push the door open, a hand darts out from nowhere and grabs a fistful of my hair. I cry out as I am dragged to the deck. Before I can haul myself back onto my knees, I am yanked once again to my feet by that hand in my hair. I yelp again and grab for the man's wrist.

"Can you make up your mind?" I demand.

He turns me, hooking an arm around my throat as he pins me to his chest and drags me back a step. I am left facing Captain Sharpe and Tristan, feeling rather ridiculous.

Sharpe raises my gun to point it at the man holding me. Shite—I probably should have told him it isn't loaded. "Release him and we won't shed any more blood," he says.

It is only then that I realize there is a pool of blood on the deck between us, and an officer lying face down in it. I look away quickly and try to wrench myself free. As I do, I hear the click of the trigger and wince.

"Kitten, you . . . !"

I don't hear the rest of what is likely a string of curses from Captain Sharpe, for the man holding me suddenly lurches forward, and we both tumble to the deck. I yell—all right, *scream*—as I land mere inches from the pooling blood, kicking my legs until the Frenchman is off me.

Then Tristan is pulling me up, and I see that Trevor has tackled the Frenchman from behind. Renard helps Trevor to his feet, then steps forward with a knife in his hand. I realize he is about to kill the man, and I turn away—just in time to see the officer from this morning struggling to stand a few yards away.

He pulls a pistol from inside his uniform jacket, and I turn to shove Tristan just as the shot rings out. Tristan hits the floor hard, but I am frozen in place, heart pounding. I am only distantly aware of Trevor tackling the officer to the deck and hitting him repeatedly in the face as I stare down at the new hole in my shirtsleeve.

"Trevor, let's go!" Renard yells as he steps past me to haul Tristan to his feet.

Sharpe’s hand clamps around my wrist, and he pulls me toward the stairs to the poop deck. “Trevor, *now*!” he shouts. The whole ship has surely heard that shot. I glance behind me, relieved to see that Trevor has obeyed and is running toward us.

He follows Sharpe and me up the stairs, where Tristan and Renard are already standing beside the grappling hook and the bloodstain from tonight’s first kill. I want to vomit, but my stomach is so knotted, I can hardly even inhale.

Sharpe releases my wrist as he peeks over the side, down to the skiff. He takes one look at the rope, and then my face, and shakes his head with a silent chuckle. What is it about this man that makes me feel so *seen*? Even when I don’t want it?

He pushes my pistol into the front of his trousers—damn you, Tydes—and mounts the rope, then hoists me over his shoulder without warning. A second later we are dangling over the ocean, and I fear I might faint from the rush of terror. I grip the back of Sharpe’s jacket as he lowers us, far too fast, down toward the fathomless ocean below. And then I am on my back on the floor of the skiff, panting as my blood rushes and my head spins.

Sharpe is grinning as he takes a seat behind my head, staring down at me. “Well, well—the kitten has claws after all,” he says, and that’s the last thing I hear before, humiliating as it may be to admit, I faint.

Some hours later I wake once again in Captain Sharpe’s bed—but this time my trousers are, blessedly, still on, and the ship is not being blown to smithereens. I slide out from under the bedclothes and smooth the wrinkles in my shirt as best I can. I freeze at the sight of the bullet hole in my left sleeve, and my heart does a strange little skitter as I recall how close Tristan and I were to being shot last night.

I’m still staring at the fraying hole when Captain Sharpe’s smooth baritone startles me from my thoughts.

“You’re awake.”

“Very observant.”

“Are we going to be bitchy now?”

I turn to him. He’s sitting at his desk, leaning back in his chair with booted feet up on the desktop. He has a glass of port in one hand, and his brow is arched as he stares right back at me.

My own brow twitches, but so does the corner of my mouth, and a moment later we are both laughing.

I push thoughts of nearly dying aside and make my way over to his desk in my stocking feet. “How long was I out?”

“A few hours. I told the men you were *indisposed*. They have . . . questions.”

I’m sure they do. “And you?” I ask.

He takes his feet off the desk and leans forward to rest his elbows against it instead as he stares at me. “A million. I’m especially curious about your reckless decision to rescue me off a French frigate.” Despite his words, his relaxed demeanor means most of them are already answered. He smirks and sits back. “Is there any danger of your father chasing after you?”

I have questions of my own, but they can wait. I frown as I consider what he’s asked me. Part of me doubts my father would care enough to come after me, but then, I *am* his son and heir. “I don’t know,” I say honestly.

Sharpe frowns and reaches up to run his fingers over his beard. “That’s a problem, Kitten.”

“No one knows I’m aboard this ship.”

“Except for Captain LaBarre and his men.”

“Who?”

Captain Sharpe gives me a pointed look and waits. When I do nothing but stare back at him, he sighs and shakes his head. “The French gentleman you dressed down on the deck of my ship yesterday.”

“Oh, him,” I say with a chuckle.

“I’m glad you think it’s funny.”

“I do. He was an utter ass. And he nearly shot me!”

“Kitten,” Sharpe says, and I hate how serious his tone is. “If word gets back to your father that his heir is on my ship, how can I be sure he won’t send the English navy after me? We did kill a few of LaBarre’s men.”

“My father doesn’t have nearly as much pull as I made him out to have,” I insist. “And I’m sure his replacement son has been born by now, so I doubt he’ll be much concerned that his heir is on a pirate ship when his spare is safe at home.” I’m not sure what to say about the men they—er, *we*—killed.

Captain Sharpe clearly wants to argue, but after a moment he concedes my point and stands. He looks like he wants to say something but isn’t sure what. We stare at each other for a few moments, and I can tell by his expression that he’s *seeing* me again. “Are you all right?”

I tense up. I wasn’t expecting that question, but now everything from the night before comes rushing back, and I am dizzy from the memory of it. I’d rather *not* think about it. I’d rather lock it away in a box inside my head and focus instead on what to do about the crew knowing my true identity.

Panic wells up inside me, making my chest tighten painfully. I try to swallow down the lump forming in my throat, but there’s no room for it to go down, as my ribs are thoroughly crushing my lungs. *I* didn’t kill anyone last night—but I took part in the men’s deaths. I am responsible, whether they died by my hand or not.

I was also nearly *shot*. There’s that, too.

Where do I go from here? I fear I have reached a precipice, and I have no choice but to throw myself into the abyss and pray someone is waiting below to catch me. Now I am certain that I can never return home, not after last night.

“I . . .”

“You’re one of us now, Kitten. Remember what I said before: You’re a seaman now. My crew are loyal to one another. That goes for you, too. Go and mess with the crew. You have to sleep in your own hammock tonight.”

I blink up at Sharpe, moved yet again by his ability to *see* me. But I also see that he’s given me an out, and I take it. “Pity, I’ve got used to your bed.”

“Good Lord, Kitten, the men are already starting to suspect I’m buggering you. Don’t make it worse.”

I can’t help but bark out a laugh as I am reminded of the conversation I had with poor Digby Hale the night of my engagement party.

Buggery and lawlessness? Where do I sign up? A self-fulfilling prophecy.

But Captain Sharpe doesn’t laugh with me, and a cold chill settles into my stomach, killing my laughter on the spot. Once I remember how to inhale, I manage to ask, “Do they really?”

Sharpe snorts, which is something I would find revolting from anyone else, but he somehow makes it seem charming. “Go,” he says, before he finishes off the port in his glass, sets it down, and crosses the cabin to his settee. “Tomorrow morning I’ll have an assignment for you.”

I watch him for a moment as he sits and works open the laces of his boots, curious. My own boots are set neatly beside my trunk, so I slip them on and lace them up quickly. As I cross the cabin toward the door, Captain Sharpe speaks once more.

“Oh—and, Kitten?”

I stop and turn to face him, but he’s got his back to me. “Thanks for rescuing me. It was very gallant of you.” He glances at me, and his smirk sends a warm rush over my cheeks.

I give a stiff nod, then retreat from the cabin to join the crew belowdecks. I wonder if it’s true that the crew think I’ve had amorous congress with the captain. No one has treated me any differently lately—at least not that I’ve noticed.

But now that they know who I really am, will that change? Am I now at risk of being ransomed back to my father? The thought terrifies me, even as I force myself to push it away. I have to learn to stop thinking the worst of these men when they've given me no reason to.

"Lord Davenport!"

I freeze at the sound of my father's title. I've reached the bottom of the stairs, and I look up to see Renard standing outside the fo'c'sle with his arms crossed. He grins at me, his eyes narrowing a bit as the sunlight glints off the very roguish bit of gold in his handsome smile.

I frown at him as I take the last few steps. "That's my father's title, not mine."

"A *viscount*, are ye? Fancy title, that."

"I'm not a viscount, my father is. Had I remained with him, I might *one day* have become a viscount . . . but I left. I have no title or viscountcy. I'm just . . . Kit."

"Ye can't just up an' decide one day ta no' be a viscount."

I sigh and roll my eyes. "Renard, I don't—"

"Have a drink weth me, Yer Lordship."

My frown deepens. "Not the swill from the galley."

"Ah, nae indeed. My own private stash."

"More of your . . . *rum*?"

He laughs—but I get the feeling now that he's laughing *at* me, rather than with me—and shakes his head. "Nae, lad. I traded weth Tydes fer a few bottles of good Scotch whisky."

That piques my interest. "Did you? When?"

"No' an hour ago. Lost a bet, he did."

I can assume that bet had something to do with me, but I decide I really don't want to know, so I just nod and motion for Renard to lead the way.

He obeys my suggestion, passing under the stairs and down the dim hallway to his small quarters. I follow him inside and sit on the edge of his

bed with all the familiarity of an old school chum. He doesn't seem bothered; whatever the usual dynamics may be between crew and boatswain, we've surely reached a point where I can call him a friend. He pulls a bottle out from behind his pillow and uses a knife to strike the neck.

I am both horrified and impressed as the neck breaks cleanly and the glass around the cork hits the floor. Renard takes a swig directly from the bottle and hands it to me. I stare at it, then squint up at Renard.

"Am I to drink from a broken bottle?"

"Aye, lad."

"And if I cut my lip open?"

"Sip carefully."

I narrow my eyes. "What if I swallow a shard of glass?"

"My advice would be ta no' swallow a shard of glass, Yer Lordship," Renard says, rolling his eyes.

I grimace, both from the title and the thought of sipping whisky from a broken bottle. I bring it to my lips and very gingerly tilt it, gulping down more than I intend to. Wincing as I swallow, I hold the bottle back out to Renard.

"I don't want to get drunk. I think one sip of that was enough."

"Turnin' soft, are ye?" Renard asks as he sits beside me.

"When did I stop being soft?" I ask.

He scoffs and takes another swig from the bottle. "Fair 'nough."

"I'm still nursing a headache from last night. I think I need a day to recover. Why don't we get pissed together tomorrow night?"

"Aye, we'll be on land by then."

I perk up at this. "Will we?"

"Aye, the cap'n wants ta spend a day out of sight, lest those frogs work out where we disappeared ta in the middle of the night."

"Ah. And where are we stopping?"

Renard takes another long swig and wipes his bottom lip with the back of his hand before he grins broadly at me. “The Republic of Pirates.”

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“Captain, are you certain you want to entrust me with this responsibility?” I ask the next morning as I stand in front of Captain Sharpe’s desk, horrified by the request he’s just made of me.

“No, but who else can I get to do it?” is his less-than-encouraging response, before he lifts his teacup to his extremely distracting mouth.

“Literally . . . anyone?”

“No, Kitten. Reuter knows everyone else on this ship. If any of them start looking for him when he’s allegedly dead—”

“Or kidnapped by sirens,” I put in helpfully.

Sharpe levels a look at me. “Or kidnapped by sirens,” he continues, “he’ll be suspicious.”

“And what am I to do, precisely? Go around asking random people if they’ve seen a crooked accountant?”

Sharpe snorts. I’m coming to realize that this is a habit of his, one he displays whenever he’s simultaneously annoyed and amused by me. (I am ridiculously charming, after all.) “No. I want you to go into the taverns and ask for a few recommendations for someone who can keep your books for you. Flaunt your wealth, wear something ridiculous.”

“Ouch.”

“Act like the empty-headed, spoilt rich boy you . . . used to be.”

“Excuse me!” I gasp, though I’m more offended by how very accurate his comment is than the comment itself. “I’ll have you know I have a wonderful head for figures.”

Sharpe grins and buries his nose in his teacup before he can be tempted to comment further. I realize by the expression on his face that I’ve walked right into a joke about my head for certain *figures*.

“And what am I to do when I find him?”

“Ask him to meet with you over a pint and take a look at your accounts.”

“I have no—”

“I’ll be there to meet with him instead,” Sharpe explains. “And then your job is over.”

“That’s it, then? Just ask around until someone mentions his name, find him, and ask him to have a drink with me?”

“Yes.”

I consider. I could do it. I put on plenty of similar ruses at Eton, to get access to certain clubs or to sneak away with pretty girls. And I suppose I proved my salt when I helped rescue Captain Sharpe from the French navy. Didn’t I? If I plan to stay and live the life of a pirate, I may as well go all in. It might even be fun, in its own way.

“What if he really is dead?” I ask.

“He isn’t.”

Well, all right, then.

“Very well, I’ll do it.”

Captain Sharpe lifts a brow as he sets his teacup down. “Not to sound like a brute, Kitten . . . but there was never a question of you doing it. You obey my orders. I’m still your captain, even if you *are* a mouthy little brat.”

“I take offense to that.”

“You’re meant to.”

Touché.

I resist the urge both to laugh and to roll my eyes. “And when am I to do this?”

“When we arrive at Port Royal. That’s where the bastard disappeared, so that’s likely where he still is.”

“Not at the Republic of Pirates?”

Captain Sharpe hesitates, then smiles as if I’ve said something amusing. “And risk being seen by me and my men? No, we frequent Nassau too often for him to be hiding there. Jamaica has more opportunities for him.”

Just as well. I don’t love the idea of wandering around in a place called the Republic of Pirates by myself, dressed in finery. Even doing so in Port Royal sounds absurdly unwise, but I know there’s gentry on Jamaica, so I should be somewhat less likely to be singled out and molested.

Somewhat.

“I don’t suppose we might find plantains on one of these islands?”

“Plantains? What do you want plantains for?”

“Billy has been requesting them for weeks,” I explain.

“It’s bad luck to have bananas on board. The men won’t like it,” Sharpe says.

“They aren’t bananas,” I say firmly. “They’re plantains. And the men will have very little to complain about once they eat them, or so Billy says.”

Sharpe chuckles and sits back at his desk. “Well . . . Billy is a smart man. If he doesn’t think it’ll cause a ruckus among the men, then by all means. And yes, you’ll find them at the market on Nassau. Take Tydes with you.”

“Why?” I ask.

Sharpe gives me another one of those *looks* that mean he expects me to read his mind. I don’t take the bait this time. I cross my arms and wait.

He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. “After seeing your skill with a pistol, I don’t trust you to be on your own anywhere there are other men.”

“I beg your finest pardon?” I ask, feigning offense, when in reality his assessment of me is, once more, absolutely correct.

He pulls the pistol from his belt and holds it up. “You’re meant to hold it from this end, Kitten.”

My cheeks heat and I narrow my eyes at him. “I am very well aware of how to hold a pistol.”

“Are you?”

“I may not know how to shoot one, but I know how to hold one,” I insist, lifting my chin. “My aim was to strike him over the head. The barrel isn’t heavy enough to knock a man out.”

Sharpe smiles and sets the pistol down on the desk. “I suppose that’s true. In any case, take Tydes with you for protection.”

“The twins—”

“Are too small to protect you if someone tries to start something with the pretty dandy asking for bananas.”

“Plantains,” I correct.

“Take Tydes.”

“Wait—*pretty*?”

Sharpe ignores me as he opens a drawer to rifle through a stack of papers. I watch him for a moment, trying to work out what he’s looking for if he can’t read. Then I realize he’s ruining the order in which I had those papers, and I hurry around the side of the desk to push his hand out of the drawer.

“You’re messing everything up,” I insist when he gives me a wide-eyed look that could be either shock or just his version of a death stare. I raise my eyebrows back at him in a silent challenge, then reach into the drawer to pull the papers out myself. “What are you looking for?”

“My letter of marque from the last time we were in Port Royal. I’ll need it when we dock.”

I roll my eyes and flip through the papers. “Who signed it?”

Sharpe’s chair gives a low creak as he leans back. “Becker or Beckford? Whatever that prick’s name is.”

“Not a fan of the governor of Jamaica, I take it?” I ask as I slip the document in question from the pile and set it down on the desk. “Do you know what it says?”

For a moment I think he might take offense to my question. But he picks up the paper and studies it. “I remember the gist of it,” he says. “And no, I’m not a fan of the tyrant of Jamaica.”

I’m not going to touch that one. I put the rest of the papers back into the drawer and ease it shut. “Well, I’m off.”

“Tydes will be down with Cook, discussing provisions.”

“Right,” I say as I snatch up my ledger. I don’t add that I have no intention of finding Mr. Tydes. Every time that man looks at me, he still gets an expression on his face as if something in my vicinity smells rank. It’s hardly conducive to feelings of amity. I turn to leave but stop myself and face Sharpe once more. “I could teach you, you know.”

The tense silence that follows makes me nervous I have overstepped. I bite my lip and am considering simply leaving the cabin when Sharpe finally offers me a strange smile that I cannot read.

“That’s kind of you, Kitten.”

“Is it?” I ask with a grimace.

He chuckles, and the tension melts from my shoulders. “Aye, it is. But I think it’s a bit late to teach this old dog new tricks.”

“Poppycock. I could teach you with the very same novel I’ve been teaching Tristan with.”

At that, he laughs—and warmth swells in my belly. “The filthy one that has him staring at you in horror with those big doe eyes?”

“The very one.”

“I may have to take you up on that, then, Kitten,” Sharpe says with a purr.

I give him my best flirtatious smile and narrow my eyes. “Wonderful. I’ll have you reading words like ‘copulation’ and ‘erogenous’ in no time.” With that, I turn to leave his cabin, the sound of Captain Sharpe’s delighted laughter following me out.

Since I would rather dive headfirst into the ocean in my silks than ask Mr. Tydes to chaperone my shopping trip, I instead make my way to the hold, where I assume Tristan and Trevor will be shirking their duties.

I’m pleased to find that my assumption is correct. I grin at them as I step into the hold and lean against a stack of crates. “Does Renard know you’re down here?”

Tristan lifts his head, wrinkling his nose at the question, and I see that they’re playing some dice game they’ve likely tried to teach me. Gambling has never been for me. Not that the risk doesn’t sound like fun—but I’d rather spend my coin on booze and company. And besides, dice is boring.

“No,” Trevor says, sitting back. “Want to play?”

“Not particularly,” I say as I move to sit with them, setting my ledger in my lap. “How about I just give you each a shilling when we get to port and we can say I played?”

Trevor wrinkles up his nose at the offer, but Tristan laughs. “I won’t say no to free coin,” he says. I smile back at him, feeling a little lazy as I lean against a crate full of sugar we filched off a merchant vessel some weeks ago.

“I didn’t think you would.”

Tristan chuckles and rolls the dice, then mutters something under his breath, and it’s Trevor’s turn to laugh. I close my eyes and allow myself to enjoy the sound of the dice dancing on the wooden floor, of Tristan’s and

Trevor's voices as they take turns laughing and insulting each other. When the sounds of their game stop, I open my eyes and look at them both. "Finished already?"

Tristan grins. "Ye fell asleep."

"Did I?"

"Ye snore," Trevor says.

I sit upright and gasp. "I do *not*," I insist. "Do I?"

"We're at port," Tristan says as he pushes the dice into his pocket. He reaches down to help me to my feet, and I frown at them both.

"Do I snore?"

"Yes," Trevor says.

At the same time Tristan shakes his head. "No. Trevor's just bein' an ass."

"What does either of you know about Jeff Reuter?" I ask as I dust off my trousers with my free hand.

My question startles them both. Tristan frowns. "Jeff, the accountant? We aren't supposed to talk about him," he says. "It'll bring down a curse on us."

I shiver a little and stare at the ledger in my hand. "So I've heard."

"Renard was friendly with him," Tristan whispers. "Even *he* wasn't safe from the curse after Jeff . . . vanished." I'm a little surprised by this revelation. Renard hadn't mentioned that he and Reuter were particularly close.

"Don't worry about him, Mr. Kit," Trevor says, patting my shoulder. "Nothin's gonna happen to ye."

I frown, letting them think that I'm worried about the curse and not the assignment Captain Sharpe has given me. "Sure," I say.

"C'mon," Tristan says, pulling my shirtsleeve. "Go get yer purse so ye can buy us somethin' in the market."

“Tristan,” Trevor scolds, but I laugh and let them lead me from the hold, even as my pulse thrums quietly in warning.

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Before disembarking the *Deliverance*, I go to Captain Sharpe's cabin to rummage through my trunk for my purse, doing my very best to ignore the anxiety building in my gut. The captain has already left his quarters; he is likely on the dock with his officers, dispensing orders and coin.

I find my purse and lock my trunk, dropping the key into said purse as I turn to leave the ledger in Captain Sharpe's desk—and jump back a step, swearing under my breath. Renard is standing in the open doorway, watching me with a peculiar frown. "Damnation, I didn't see you there," I sigh as I slide my purse into my inside jacket pocket.

Renard lifts his gaze from my pocket and crosses his arms. "Ready fer that drink?"

"I promised the twins I'd go into the market with them." I slide the ledger into the top drawer, then close and lock it, putting the key into my waistcoat pocket, where I know it will be safe. Not that I think I need to worry about any of the crew—but I still prefer to be careful.

"Market closes at sundown," Renard says, sounding distracted as he watches me. He lifts his gaze to my face once more and nods toward the bright orange glow off to the west. "Ye can go weth 'em tomorrow."

“Ah.” I frown a little, then acquiesce. “A drink it is, then,” I say as I step out of Sharpe’s cabin.

Renard glances inside just before I close the door. “Still keepin’ yer things in Cap’n’s cabin, hmm? Dinnae trust the men?”

I laugh as we cross the deck. “I’m not worried about the crew. But unless someone moves it for me, that trunk isn’t going anywhere.”

Renard claps me on the back and squeezes my bicep, which is annoying. I swat him away, even as he laughs. “Yer no’ as wee as ye were when ye came aboard, lad. Ye might surprise yerself.”

“I doubt it,” I say, though secretly I am a little pleased to hear it.

I don’t see Captain Sharpe or the twins when Renard and I make it to the dock. My legs feel strange and stiff as I reacquaint myself with the rigid, unmoving earth beneath my feet. I kind of hate it.

“Fergot how ta use yer land legs again?” Renard asks with a grin that’s more of a sneer.

“Apparently so.”

“It’ll take a minute er two, but ye’ll get used ta it again.”

I already know he’s right, but I don’t say so. By the time we step inside a raucous tavern called the Crown and Cup, I’ve readjusted to walking on land—and the second we step through the door, my senses are overwhelmed. Though it was noisy as we approached, it’s so loud inside that I’m quite certain I can *see* sound vibrating in my vision. The scent of body odor mixed with burned meat and liquor hangs heavy in the thick, stale air, and it’s all I can do not to gag.

Renard guides me to a table by a back door that is empty of people but covered in dirty mugs and half-eaten food. I grimace as I sit, and when he holds his hand out to me, I reach into my purse without complaint and drop a few coins into his hand. My trunk key lands in his palm and he raises a brow. “I cannae buy us dinner weth this.”

“Ah, apologies,” I say as I take it back and replace it with another coin. He pats my shoulder, with a scoff, and pushes his way through the crowd to

the bar, while I sit back to wait.

It’s not long before Renard returns with two pints and a pretty barmaid with an ample bosom. She sets down two plates heaped with potatoes and small cooked hens, then takes the dirty plates and winks at me before walking away without a word.

Once my belly is full and I’ve had two more pints of ale, I feel much more relaxed. The clamor of the tavern makes it impossible to focus on any sort of conversation, but I don’t mind. Pleasantly tipsy, I loosen the tie of my shirt and run my fingers through my hair. “It’s hot,” I point out. How very astute of me.

“Aye.”

“And loud.”

“Aye.”

I frown at Renard and push myself up. “I’m going to see if they’ve any rooms for let. I want to sleep in a real bed tonight.”

Renard stands as well, pint in hand. How many has he had? I don’t remember seeing him order refills, but perhaps they came with mine. “Aye, right. We can drink upstairs fer a bit.”

I try not to think about how he’s just invited himself to drink in my room. I suppose I *shouldn’t* think much of it, since he and I were drinking in his quarters on the *Deliverance* only the day before.

I push my way to the bar to make arrangements for a room for the night. After a lot of yelling back and forth over the noise, I finally toss some coin onto the counter and point up. It’s more than enough for a room—and more drink.

The barkeep scoops up the coins with a nod.

“Wine,” I say. “Not ale.”

Not ten minutes later Renard and I step into my let room. It’s hardly the nicest place I’ve ever stayed, but it’s not the worst. I’ve been in brothels far less clean and comfortable than this. The bed isn’t large, but it’s fine for me on my own. There is a small table with two chairs on either side of it. I set

the wineglasses down, glancing up when I hear the bolt on the door slide into place.

Renard shrugs at me as he turns away from it. “If we’re gettin’ pissed, cannae be too careful.”

True.

Still: “I can’t get *too* pissed; I have work to do in the morning.”

Renard snorts at that and sits down. “Yer already pissed.”

I grin and slide out of my shoes before sinking into my own chair. “No.”

“Aye.”

“Maybe a little.”

He smirks and gives a shake of his head as he pops the cork on the wine and pours us each a glass. Then he drinks directly from the bottle before setting it down. A more sober version of me would be disgusted by that, but somewhat-drunk me doesn’t care. I clink glasses with him and drink down a third of mine in one go.

I grimace. It’s not good wine—but then, this isn’t a dinner party, where the point of wine is to taste it. This is a tavern, and I’m getting drunk with a friend.

“Congratulations on becomin’ a real pirate, lad,” Renard says to me after setting his own glass down.

I’m surprised by the comment. I sit up straight. “I didn’t realize the captain had told you.” It’s Renard’s turn to be confused, so I elucidate. “About Jeff Reuter.”

“Ah,” Renard says, nodding. “He started ta . . .” He studies me, assessing. I wonder if he’s deciding whether I am smart enough to follow through with Sharpe’s plan. “What’d ye find out?”

I lean forward conspiratorially, holding my glass with both hands. “He was embezzling. He wasn’t very discreet about it either. I think he assumed the captain would never have anyone else look at the books, so he barely bothered to cover his tracks.”

Renard raises his brows. “Nae,” he whispers.

“Yes!” I say with a little too much enthusiasm. It’s like gossiping about classmates back at Eton, and I’m rather enjoying myself. “He stole a great deal of coin and jewels from the ship. He must have taken it all with him when he ‘mysteriously disappeared,’” I say, waving my arm for dramatic effect, though it makes me spill a bit of wine on my black trousers.

I wrinkle my nose and pat at the wet spot. At least they’re black.

“Just him alone?”

I look at Renard. “Oh. I didn’t think of that.”

“Ah, nae one else disappeared,” he says quickly. “I’m sure he worked alone.”

I nod, but his comment gets me thinking. “I wonder if he’s spent it all.”

“I guess we’ll never ken,” Renard says.

“We may,” I say, taking another long sip of my wine and smiling. “The captain asked me to find him.”

At that, Renard appears truly shocked, which is rather annoying. Why *shouldn’t* I be able to find him? I’ve surely proven myself at this point. My scheme to rescue our captain from the French navy went off (almost) entirely without a hitch, did it not?

“What?” I demand. “I’m capable of finding someone.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“Pishposh,” I say, waving a hand. “He won’t know why I’m looking for him. I’ll ask around at a few taverns in Jamaica, pretending I’m seeking a bookkeeper. The captain will take over after that. It’s hardly a daring rescue mission.”

Renard is silent for a while. I take the opportunity to finish my glass of wine and pour another. Then his mouth widens into a dangerous grin—the gold of his tooth glinting in the candlelight. For a moment he looks like the dashing villain out of a faerie story.

“What?” I ask, somewhere between delightfully charmed and irrefutably disquieted.

“Usin’ yer pretty face ta lure him in, are ye?”

“Hardly, more like my heavy purse.” Then I blink and narrow my eyes at Renard. Is he flirting with me? He’s called my clothes pretty in jest before—but never *me*. Immediately I slip into my usual manner, letting my thighs fall open as I lounge back in the chair and grin. “You think I’m pretty?”

Renard watches me for another long while with a frown. Just when I am about to take it back, he seems to come to some kind of decision. He gets up off his seat and leans over me, one hand on either arm of my chair. I raise my brows and stare up at him. And a moment later his mouth is on mine.

Though in truth I am shocked by this turn of events, I let him kiss me. I let him take the glass of wine from my hand and set it on the table beside us. I let him take hold of my collar and pull me up—all while his tongue is in my mouth. It’s been ages since I was kissed like this. Digby was the last person to touch me, and I find that, despite my not having expected it, I want it.

I *need* it.

I wrap my arms around Renard’s neck and moan into the kiss as he backs me toward the bed. I don’t know how far I should let this go, but at the moment all I can think about is how desperate I am to have his hands on my body. Really, *any* hands on my body . . . but his are here, and already exploring.

Though I can think of another set of calloused hands I would vastly prefer to these . . .

The thought nearly kills the mood entirely for me. When did I become so . . . *romantic*? Some part of me wants this to continue, if only to expel these unfamiliar—and *unwelcome*—thoughts of monogamy from my head.

I need to stop thinking about Captain Sharpe. Especially in this moment. I work open the buttons of my waistcoat and somehow do not trip as we move across the room. I drop the navy silk onto the floor, and it lands with the chink of coin, then my arms are around Renard’s neck once more.

He breaks the kiss as my calves bump the side of the bed. His hands are on my waist now, sliding up to free my shirt from the waistband of my trousers. My pulse quickens as I feel his skin on mine, his fingertips sliding across my belly and then hooking in the front of my trousers.

I am dizzy with want for this, even as my mind wanders to brown eyes and beaded locs. *Stupid.* I push the thought away once more. I didn't realize until this moment just how starved for touch I have been since running away from home. For more than companionable slaps on the back or nudges from the men. I *need* to be *touched*—and if Captain Sharpe can't be the one to do it, maybe this is fine . . .

I plop onto the bed, drawing Renard in for another kiss. He presses his knee into the mattress beside me as he leans into it, grunting under his breath. Somehow the kiss is losing momentum. Is he losing interest, or am I? Lord in heaven, have I gone soft in my months at sea? Am I ruined now, all because of one damned pirate's dashing smile and irresistible charm? He's never even expressed—

Then Renard bites my lip, and I jerk my head back with a gasp.

I try not to blame him. He doesn't know how much I hate rough play. But before I can tell him, his hand is in my hair and he's jerking my head back to expose my neck.

"Hey," I gasp as his mouth finds a sensitive spot just under my earlobe.

Suddenly I am in my father's study with Digby Hale once again, the taste of metal on my lip. I *hate* that. I shove Renard away—probably a bit too hard, but I am drunk and he is still on one foot. He stumbles back and nearly collides with the chair behind him.

"The fuck?" he snaps at me, looking understandably bewildered and annoyed.

"Sorry, I—"

He steps forward before I can finish, and then he strikes me with an open palm across the face. The son of a bitch actually *strikes me*.

My head snaps to the side and I take in a sharp, strangled gasp. I stare at the wall with wide eyes as *he* stares at me, his chest heaving in my periphery. I've been roughed about a bit since joining the crew, but this . . . this feels *different*.

"What'd ye do that fer?" he growls.

I look up at him. I can taste blood *inside* my mouth now. "Get out."

"Fine, I'll find myself a woman instead," he says with a sneer, picking up my purse from the floor and rummaging through to pull some coin from it. "Ye owe me." He pockets whatever he's taken and drops the purse onto the floor as I get to my feet.

I don't argue with him. I don't care that he's taken money from me; I just want him out of the room *now*. I hate how quickly I've sobered up from this interaction. I've skipped right over the pleasurable buzz of intoxication and landed deep in a pounding headache.

It's probably for the best anyway. Apparently, I am destined to be a monk for the rest of my life, for want of a man who very likely has absolutely no interest in me beyond my ability to do sums, keep his ledgers, and flirt with reckless abandon.

As soon as I hear Renard close the door, I cross the room to lock it behind him. Then I wipe the blood from my mouth with the back of my hand. If he's left a bruise on my face, there'll be hell to pay. For now, though, I need to vomit and I need to sleep. I'll worry about my face tomorrow.

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To say I am relieved to find the twins first thing the next morning would be an understatement. Mostly, I'm relieved that it isn't Renard I run into. They don't see me initially, as their backs are to me, but I come up behind them and grab Tristan's elbow to get his attention. He spins around, startled, but smiles when he recognizes me. "We lost ye last night."

"I lost myself last night," I say with a grimace.

"Ye've a mark on yer cheek."

Shit. I hate that. I absolutely *hate* that. My stomach gives an uneasy lurch at the recollection of Renard striking me across the face, but I swallow down the feeling and suck in a breath. The twins are staring at me expectantly. I reach up to touch my cheek, feigning surprise. "Ah—the bed in my room was dreadfully tiny. I think I fell off at some point."

Trevor snorts, but Tristan doesn't look convinced. I don't blame him—I've hardly convinced myself. Still, neither of them presses me further.

"Ye promised to buy us somethin'," Tristan reminds me.

I chuckle at that. "I did," I agree. "Help me find plantains for Billy, then you can buy whatever you want." I squint a little and reconsider. "Within reason."

“He just wants sweetmeats,” Trevor says, pointing to a wooden sign at the end of the road that simply says Baked Goods.

Tristan smiles. “I have a sweet tooth.”

“Me too,” I say with a nod. “We’ll go in there after we fetch the plantains. Did the captain say how long we were to stay at port?”

“Just one day,” Trevor says. “He thinks the Frenchmen may come lookin’ for us here.”

That makes sense. And I can’t say I’m disappointed. This island has left a bad taste in my mouth, and I’m eager to put it behind me. “Just as well,” I say. “If the captain asks, I tried to find Mr. Tydes.”

The twins shoot matching quizzical expressions in my direction as we make our way into the market, but I don’t clarify and they don’t ask.

The marketplace is buzzing with activity. I am fascinated by the riot of color around me. While many of the men here are dressed in black, there are so many others in bright silks and delicate lace. More languages than I could count are spoken around me, and the smell of spices and cooking meat fills the air. Never have I seen so much color or smelled so many different things at once. I am overwhelmed—but I am enjoying every moment of it.

The plantains, remarkably, are easily found. Seeing them, I understand now why they are compared to bananas. They must be somewhat similar, for they *look* nearly the same, though they are bigger, with a less distinct shape. I buy as many as we can comfortably carry—although, really, Tristan and Trevor are the ones who each take a handle and carry the crate between them.

I’m grateful to them, but I feel a little like their employer rather than their friend as we continue through the marketplace. We stop here and there to admire various trinkets for sale. I am particularly fascinated by a collection of booths lined up together selling food and goods from East Asia. As we approach, the air around them is heavy with an unfamiliar but intense aroma that sets my mouth watering and my belly whimpering. I inhale deeply—but then something new catches my eye, and as Tristan and

Trevor continue on to another booth, I stop and smile at a young girl sitting on her own beside a beautiful display of sparkling glass and tinkling bits of metal and wood.

A row of miniature wooden huts with little flared roofs sway in the breeze, wooden tubes of various sizes dangling below them from small bits of twine. They seem to catch the air as they dance, turning the movement into a beautiful cacophony of song. I reach out and brush my fingers along the tubes to make them bounce together, and they sing back to me. I smile, and the child beside me laughs.

“These are beautiful,” I say—though I am not sure she understands. “What are they?”

“Wind chimes,” a voice says from behind me. I whirl to see a man in a simple grey smock coat, worn over some kind of white-and-blue robe that nearly reaches the ground. His dark hair has been shaved nearly clean off, though I can see the shadow of where it grows back. He bows to me, but before I can respond, he motions to the singing huts, with a smile. “They catch wind to sing. For protection.”

Fascinated, I turn back to admire them. “How wonderful,” I say, more to myself than to anyone else. “Protection from what?”

“Evil spirits,” he explains.

I suppose every culture must have its own superstitions. I have never considered that I might need protection from any sort of evil spirit outside of temptation, but I suppose that is due to my education in the Church of England. I rather like the thought of beautiful trinkets protecting us from things we cannot control, in lieu of us needing protection from the darkness we are inherently born with.

Still, the thought sends a chill rippling up my spine, despite the heat of the day.

“And these?” I ask, pointing to another row of dangling art. These are made of bits of cut glass, stained in an array of bright colors, and do not sway as easily in the wind. They remind me a bit of church windows, but they feel buoyant and cheerful. As they spin slowly, some catch the sun and

sparkle. Others cast a rainbow of light in their reflections against the ground and on people walking by.

“Suncatchers, for luck,” he says.

I smile back at him, utterly charmed by the simple beauty of these items. I want to ask him more about them, but someone takes me by the arm, and I whirl to see Trevor. “Thought we’d lost ye,” he says. “We’re hungry.”

I nod and turn back to the man in the grey smock, but he has directed his attention to another sailor, so I allow Trevor to guide me to the next booth. He motions to a table full of smoked meat on small wooden spears, so I buy three, and we step aside to enjoy them. They are dripping with a golden sauce that bursts with flavor on my tongue. Never have I tasted anything quite like it.

“What is this?” I ask the twins.

Tristan shrugs and continues chewing, but Trevor has already finished and is licking sauce from his fingers. “I can’t remember what it’s called. It’s some chicken dish from China.”

I lick some of the sweet, sticky sauce from the corner of my mouth. “It’s delicious.” We don’t have food like this at home. “Think Cook would be offended if we asked him to make this?” I ask.

Trevor smirks. “I want to be there when ye ask.”

I grin at the challenge and approach the woman at the booth again. “Excuse me,” I say, once she’s no longer engaged with a customer. She wears a simple blue frock with red trimmings along the collar. The garment seems to button at a diagonal across the front of her shoulder and down the side seam. It hangs loose around her body, but the sleeves are wide and bare her forearms. It is so unlike anything I have ever known a woman to wear. I cannot see beyond the height of the booth, and though I am terribly curious, I dare not stare too long or ask any questions for fear of seeming rude.

She blinks at me, then offers me a noticeably forced smile and motions toward the meat skewers. “Another?” she asks.

I consider, glancing toward the twins, who are both staring at me with raised brows and wide eyes. “Yes,” I decide. “Three, please.” I hand her some coin and gesture for the twins to come and retrieve their second helping. “I’ve never tried something so delicious,” I say as she hands me my second skewer.

She gives me an odd look, and then her smile grows genuine. “You have good taste,” she says. “Rare for an Englishman.”

I laugh, charmed by her brutal honesty. “I’m sure my father would simply perish if he had to eat anything quite so flavorful,” I say—and now it’s her turn to laugh. “I wonder, would you be willing to tell me how it’s made? Our ship leaves tonight, and I can’t bear the thought of never eating this again.”

She narrows her eyes, but her smile remains. “You cook?” she asks, an incredulous note in her voice.

“Dear God—no,” I say.

“He’d poison us all,” Trevor puts in helpfully, his mouth full of chicken. “We got a cook on the ship.”

She nods knowingly and gives me another assessing once-over. I can see she’s considering telling me no, so I hold up my purse and smile. “I’m perfectly willing to compensate you.”

With a nod, she motions to the skewers on her booth. “It is too complicated to teach,” she explains in her careful English. “But I will make for you. The sauce,” she clarifies. “Send someone strong to carry it. Tonight, after sunset. *Not* you.”

Tristan and Trevor both laugh, and I feign offense for a moment before I place a generous pile of coin into her hand. “You have yourself a deal, madam.”

She pockets the coin, then clasps her hands together and bows neatly at the knee, tilting her head down slightly. I watch her for a moment, unsure of how to respond to such a gesture. All I can think to do is bow to her as I would any lady, so I cross my arm over my belly and bow at the waist,

before I allow Tristan and Trevor to usher me farther into the market, with one last glance back at the woman behind the booth.

As we continue on our way, the twins in front and me lagging behind as I drink in the beautiful array of colors and culture, a sliver of royal blue in my peripheral vision stops me dead in my tracks.

I turn to scan the crowd and find what I am looking for. The sight of a man in a French naval uniform sends my heart galloping. There are three of them, standing a mere twenty paces away. Their attention, for the moment, is drawn to something on a table; one of them seems to be flirting with the young woman selling wares behind it. I can tell by her expression that she's not impressed but is trying to be polite to make a sale.

The dark hair under his hat reminds me of another French sailor . . . one with a bolt sticking out of his left eye.

All at once I cannot breathe. They've found us. They'll arrest us all, and we'll be hanged. Christ, I cannot *breathe*. I don't want to hang. I'm too pretty to hang. What kind of death is that for a young gentleman?

A hand on my arm sends me reeling about with a gasp that stings my burning lungs, and Tristan jumps back, alarmed. "Mr. Kit?"

I release a trembling puff of air and manage to inhale just a bit as I turn to look at the sailors once more.

Tristan must follow my gaze, for he speaks up from behind me. "It's not them, Mr. Kit. It's all right."

I face him and shake my head. "You can't know that."

Tristan nods. "I do," he says. "There is only one French ship in the port today. It's not them."

I turn once more to the sailors, only to find one of them staring in my direction. Panic races through my veins, but I close my mouth and straighten my back. He sees me—our gazes meet—but his attention drifts away without recognition. He nudges one of his comrades and points to another booth farther down in the market. The other sailor leans back to see what he's pointing at, then nods with a laugh.

It isn’t them.

I let myself exhale once more and close my eyes. My heart is still racing, my chest tight. “I’m sorry,” I say to Tristan. “I thought . . .”

Tristan pats my shoulder. “I know.”

I nod and swallow down my anxiety. Of all the ships I could have chosen the morning I decided to run away, I’m glad it was the one with Tristan on board. I smile at him, and this seems to be enough for him to stop worrying. He nods toward Trevor, who is waiting for us a few booths down.

With one last glance toward the French sailors, I follow Tristan as we catch up.

The smell of smoke and burned sugar is the next thing to catch my attention as we walk, and soon I am stopping again, stepping over to a stand with vivid bolts of silk stacked in baskets. Beside them, a man in a creamy-yellow turban and a blue silk tunic—and bronze skin, like mine—sits on a woven rug. His legs are crossed, and in front of him sits a painted glass vessel that reminds me of an urn or a vase. Using two fingers, he holds the wooden tip of a hose against his lips. He puffs a few times, then sits back to release a stream of smoke into the air. The burned-sugar smell is stronger now.

Fascinated, I step closer and watch a moment longer, before he sees me staring and lowers the pipe from his mouth. He says something to me, but I cannot understand him. Then he takes in the cut of my clothes and frowns. “You are English?” he asks, his accent thick, but not so thick that I cannot understand him.

“Yes,” I say. And because for some reason I feel the need to defend myself, I follow this with, “But my mother was Turkish.” I nearly add *like you*, but I think he gets the point, because he smiles at me and waves me over.

The twins have stopped and are watching me now, but I am too intrigued to mind. The man motions for me to sit, and I do, though it’s a struggle to cross my legs as he does in my fitted silk trousers. Sitting this

close, I can see that his eyes are lined in black, making his lashes seem thick and heavy.

“I’m not Muslim,” I say, concerned I’ll make some egregious cultural misstep in my ignorance, but he waves a hand and holds the pipe out to me anyway. I take it, both curious and afraid of offending him. He points to his lips, and I bring the pipe to my mouth, inhaling. Instantly I realize I’ve made an error. I start to choke, clouds of smoke bursting out of my mouth and nose as I do.

The man laughs and shakes his head. He takes back the pipe and waits for me to catch my breath before demonstrating.

I watch closely as he touches the tip of the pipe to his lower lip. He inhales deeply and slowly, as if filling his belly, then tilts his head back and releases a stream of white smoke into the air around him. “Like this,” he says, smoke billowing around his words.

I am hesitant to try again, but I do. I take the pipe and mimic what he showed me as best I can. I cough again, but not nearly as much as the first time. I am able to blow a stream of smoke into the air this time, even as my eyes water a little. The taste it leaves behind is something like smoked honey—not altogether unpleasant, but nothing like I imagined.

The man laughs again and pats me roughly on the back. “Very good, son of my sister,” he says.

I am disarmed by the turn of phrase. I am sure he doesn’t literally mean his sister—how could he possibly know who my mother was? I wonder if it’s a term of endearment, or some kind of mistranslation, but I do not press him. “Thank you, sir,” I say, handing the pipe back. I get to my feet and bow to him as I might to someone higher than I in the peerage. I don’t know any other way to show him respect, or my gratitude.

He laughs as I turn to walk away with the twins, who appear baffled but don’t ask me about the strange interaction. It’s just as well, for I can feel the sting of tears in my eyes, and I know that my voice would give me away if I had to say a single word in this moment.

Billy’s excitement when I present him with the crate full of plantains is palpable. He embraces me, clapping me on the back a few times. “I knew you’d come through for me, Kit,” he says.

During our time at port, Billy remained on the ship with a few of the other men. I don’t ask why, but I can imagine it has something to do with men of his color being in great danger of capture by slavers on land. I’m pleased I could do this small thing for him. “I hope that’s enough. It took both Tristan and Trevor to carry it on board.”

Laughing, Billy lifts the crate with ease. “It’s more than enough. I’ll bring them down to the galley to ripen. When they are ready, we will share a meal of maduros, just like my mother made.”

After today’s adventure in trying new things, I am certainly eager to experience more unfamiliar foods. “I look forward to it,” I say to him in earnest. Then I glance around and find Rodriguez, who’s about to follow Billy down belowdecks. “Rodriguez!” I call. “Could I beg a favor?”

Rodriguez lifts a brow, but he doesn’t continue down the stairs, so I offer my best charming smile and wave him over. He rolls his eyes but approaches with arms crossed. “What’ve you got up your sleeve this time?”

“I purchased a cask of sauce from a woman in the market,” I explain, waving Trevor over. “Trevor can show you where she is. Could you fetch the cask for me?”

“*Fetch* it for you?” he asks, raising a brow once more. “Why should I?”

“Don’t worry,” Trevor interrupts with a grin. “It’s worth yer while. And after, we can watch Cook give Mr. Kit a walloping for oversteppin’.”

I shoot Trevor a glare. “Is that your plan?”

Trevor just laughs and hurries back toward the gangplank. I turn back to Rodriguez, but he’s got a grin to match Trevor’s and is already following him across the deck.

“Great, thanks for that!” I call after them. When they ignore me, I lift my other parcel from where it sits on the deck by my feet and let myself into Captain Sharpe’s cabin. I saw him up by the figurehead when I came aboard, so I know he isn’t inside.

I stop short at the sight of my trunk sitting wide open at the foot of Sharpe’s bed. Did I leave it open like that? I set my parcel down and make my way over to it, staring into the mess of clothes. I recall rummaging about in search of my purse, but I cannot for the life of me remember if I closed and locked it when I was through.

I pull my purse from my pocket and search it. When I find no key, I search my waistcoat pockets but discover only the key to Sharpe’s desk drawer. Frowning, I reach for the lock on top of my trunk and find the key still inside. I must have been distracted when I grabbed my purse yesterday. Since my purse is safely in my hand, I know for sure that I wasn’t robbed—not that any of the men on *this* ship would rob me. I sigh and drop the purse back inside, keeping the key to Sharpe’s desk in my palm as I close the trunk, lock it, and deliberately slide the key into my waistcoat pocket.

Then I pick up the little parcel wrapped in brown paper and tied with a pretty blue ribbon and take a seat at Captain Sharpe’s desk. I unlock the drawer to my right, where he keeps his spyglass and compass caliper. It’s then that I notice scratches in the drawer’s face, along the keyhole. I frown as I brush my fingers along them. Have they always been there? I really ought to drink less—my memory is appalling as of late. This desk is hardly in tip-top condition, though; the scratches have likely always been there, and I have simply been too self-involved to notice.

I close the drawer and lock it, leaving the key in the hole, as I usually do when both Captain Sharpe and I are around. I know he’ll find the parcel later, likely after he’s settled in for the night. I’d rather he find it that way; it would be embarrassing, somehow, to hand it to him directly.

Once that is done, I step back out on deck and watch as the men move about the ship, preparing for departure. I wait on the stairs by Sharpe’s cabin door for Trevor and Rodriguez to return. When they do, with a cask

far larger than I anticipated, I leap to my feet and wave for them to follow me down to the galley, where I can hear Cook barking orders to his men. I slip in past Naeem as he leaves the galley, repeating the orders to the men carrying Cook's newly acquired rations down to the hold.

I offer Cook my best smile as Trevor and Rodriguez follow me in.

"What do *you* want?" Cook grumbles, without looking up at me.

"I have a gift for you."

He looks up then, suspicion written across his face. "That so?"

Trevor snorts from behind me, but I motion to the cask Rodriguez has set down. "A fine cask of sauce from China."

"And what am I ta do with that?"

"Cook with it, I imagine," I suggest.

Cook's eyes narrow further and he crosses his arms. "Yer askin' fer a black eye, lad."

My smile doesn't falter, because he is still calling me "lad," not "lordling"—which means I have much more time before I need to start dodging punches. "Oh, come now—don't you want the chance to make something new?"

"Got a problem with my cookin', do ya?"

"I never said that," I point out. "I'm merely—"

"Insulting me."

Trevor is giggling behind me now, and I shoot daggers his way before looking back to Cook once more. "I meant no insult, on my honor as a gentleman," I say, setting a hand over my heart. "I just thought the men might like—"

Something red whizzes past my ear and strikes the doorframe behind me with a squelch.

"Right," I say, taking a step back. "I'll just leave this with you, shall I?" I duck as a second tomato hurtles toward me, grazing my ear before landing on the floor with a plunk. I don't give him time to gather a third. I hurry

from the galley, chased by the sound of Trevor and Rodriguez's raucous laughter, and a string of curses from Cook.

Tristan is grinning at me, shaking his head as if he predicted exactly how that interaction would go. I offer a sheepish grin in reply and shrug. With any luck, Cook won't want to waste food, and we will get to enjoy that delightful sauce again sometime soon.

I make my way back up on deck just in time to hear Billy call, "Weigh anchor!" The crew is already in motion as I head to the starboard bow, where I might be out of the way and enjoy the best view of the sunset when we come about.

It's then that I see Renard, and my stomach drops.

He's the last of the men to come back on deck, and once he does, he makes straight for the stairs that lead below. For one awful moment before he disappears into the bowels of the ship, he stops to glance up, and our gazes meet. The sight of him makes my stomach churn. I could throw up, but instead I hold my breath and wait for some kind of sign from him—anything to tell me how to feel in the wake of our last horrible encounter.

But he just grimaces, and I am left wondering whether it was out of disgust or discomfort as he turns away from me and disappears into the shadowy staircase belowdecks.

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Twenty

It's less than a week before we reach Port Royal. In that time I have seen Renard only twice, and each time he has avoided looking directly at me. I do hope this isn't going to be a permanent thing. I don't love the idea of remaining trapped in close quarters with such animosity brewing between us, and I refuse to beg anyone for an apology. It all feels like a recipe for disaster.

What will I do if he decides to tell other members of the crew, twisting the story in his favor? Would they turn on me? Despite everything Sharpe has said about my being one of them, I can't help but hear my father's voice in my head, reminding me of my curse and how unlovable I am. Does the crew's loyalty surpass the strength of my curse? As much as I joked with Digby Hale about pirate ships being a hotbed of buggery, I know this isn't actually true.

No one else is acting strange around me, though, as far as I can tell. Or if they are, it's because they've taken to calling me "lordling" again and making snide comments about my father's title. Snide comments are fine; I think most of them stem purely from a mislike of the peerage, rather than true animosity. That's understandable—I mislike the peerage too.

I *have* noticed the new blue ribbon tying back Captain Sharpe's locs, however. And unfortunately, so have the men. He thanked me the next morning for the surprise of pastries in his desk drawer. I thought that was that, but then I saw the damned ribbon . . . and to make matters worse, whenever someone teases him about it, his gaze locks straight on to me. Whatever happened to subtlety?

Most of the men assume it was a gift from a harlot on Nassau, which he's neither confirmed nor denied, so none of them seem to suspect me.

Except for the twins.

They stared at me with wide eyes the moment they noticed it, and I could do nothing but shake my head and insist, "It's a good-quality ribbon. He's just being pragmatic."

I don't think they're convinced. And truly, neither am I.

Now every time I'm alone with Captain Sharpe, I'm far too aware of how my skin is too tight and my clothes too garish. As much as I flirted with him before, it seems dangerous to do so now. Dangerous because it feels *tangible*—and I'm not actually sure it would be wise to climb into bed with a pirate captain while I'm a member of his crew.

"Are you ready, Kitten?"

I jump and look up from the ledger at the sound of Captain Sharpe's voice directly beside me. The blue ribbon is there, teasing me as it hangs over his shoulder—a sharp, beautiful contrast to the sun-bleached brown of his hair.

"Not at all," I say.

He laughs and leans against the desk. "You'll do just fine. You're more capable than you think."

"I'm exactly as capable as I think," I insist as I slip the ledger into his desk and stand. "But not nearly as capable as *you* think."

"I must think very highly of you," Captain Sharpe says with a smile that's too gentle.

“It’s easy to do.” I shrug into my jacket and smooth out my waistcoat. I’ve dressed today in one of my finest ensembles: a pair of sky-blue trousers with a gold waistcoat, white shirt, and navy-blue jacket. It’s a combination that screams, *I’m a helpless dandy with too much money to spare.*

I can see him assessing me as I slide my cravat under my collar and begin to tie it. “What’s wrong?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“You’re frowning at me.”

Sharpe has the good grace to look abashed. “You look very handsome,” he says.

There’s a “but” in there somewhere, so I raise my brows and tilt my head expectantly. I won’t take the bait.

“But I don’t like seeing you rigged up like this.”

“There it is,” I murmur.

“Have I insulted you?”

I chuckle and slide my purse into my jacket pocket. “No. But I like that you’re *worried* about insulting me.”

“Don’t take your purse with you,” he says. “You’ll get robbed.”

I let him reach into my pocket and remove the purse. He drops it into his desk drawer and pulls out another purse, then hands it over to me. It’s just as heavy as mine. He locks the drawer and takes the key as I open the new purse to peer into it. Inside is mostly stones, rubbed smooth from the sands and tide. Mixed with it is a small amount of coin, but nothing substantial. It’s smart. This way, I come across as wealthy but don’t risk losing more than a few shillings.

“Meet me at the Three Crowns Inn once you’ve found him. I’ll have a room there. If you don’t see me, tell anyone there you’re my guest. They’ll be waiting for you. Arrange a meeting there with Reuter tomorrow morning to go over your books.”

I very carefully do not think about the last time I was in a let room with another man. I’m most definitely not thinking about Renard kissing me, or

touching me, or the way he slid his fingers along my belly before I realized it was going all wrong. And I *certainly* am not taking a single breathless moment to consider how differently that night might have gone had it been Captain Sharpe climbing into bed with me, with his gentle hands and his low voice rumbling in my ear as I gave myself entirely to him.

I clear my throat and nod, forcing myself to smirk up at him. “Aye, aye, Captain.”

Jamaica, for what it’s worth, doesn’t hold quite the same charm as Nassau. It lacks the color and allure of the marketplace. There is more order here—more gentry. Christopher-Henry would have preferred this place, but Mr. Kit isn’t so sure. The air, however, tastes of spices and cooking meat, and it’s making my mouth water.

Searching for Jeffrey Reuter isn’t nearly as fun as I made it out to be in my head. I should have had one of the twins dress up in livery of some kind and pretend to be my servant. At least then I’d have someone to talk to . . . and to watch my back. My legs are getting tired, and my feet are beginning to hurt. What was I thinking wearing these heels on the cobblestone street? I am not used to this much movement in one day, and especially not in this heat.

I’ve visited three taverns already, asking for suggestions of a local man to keep my books for me. I’ve had plenty of names written down for me, but not one of them is the name I’m seeking.

I have little hope as I push my way to the bar inside the fourth establishment of my search and wave the barkeep over to order myself an ale.

“Your kind usually port in Kingston, where all the gentry are,” he notes as he fills a mug for me. “What’s brought you to Port Royal? It’s a rough place to be.”

I wet my dry tongue with a few sips of the ale, then drop some coin onto the counter. “My father is commissioned by the king in the war on piracy.”

There’s a glint in the man’s eye that could be either fascination or downright unfriendliness. I try to appear bored at the idea of it. Then I slam my hand down onto the bar top. “Actually, perhaps you can help me! You see, I come into my majority soon, and Father wants me to start minding my own part of the family business.” I roll my eyes for dramatic effect. “I’ve a terrible head for numbers and am in desperate need of a man to keep my books . . .” I glance over my shoulder and lean in close. “Without my father knowing.”

The barkeep seems scandalized, but he grins at me and leans in close. “I have just the man for the job. Reuter is the name.”

For a moment I panic. It takes me longer than it should to remember to inhale. “Reuter, you say? That’s a strong Prussian name. Where might I find this man? Is he nearby?”

“Oh yes,” the man says with a nod.

I pretend to search my pockets for something to write with, and he holds up a finger and steps away from the bar. A moment later he is back with a small, torn piece of parchment that has an address jotted down on it. “It’s not a far walk.”

“High Street?” I ask, squinting at his writing as I take the paper.

“Past the school. The house with the red roof.”

“Much appreciated,” I say, dropping a few more pennies down for his trouble. “You’ve positively saved my neck.”

I finish my pint in a few gulps and push the piece of parchment into my waistcoat pocket. My heart is racing all over again, but this time with excitement. I am so close to finding this Jeffrey Reuter and making Captain Sharpe proud.

The strange thought gives me pause, but then something else catches my attention. Stepping out of the tavern just in front of me is Renard. Did

he see me and hurry away to avoid me? I frown and follow him. “Renard,” I call.

He stops and turns, grimacing. “Kit . . .”

“You’ve been avoiding me.”

“Aye.”

“I don’t want there to be a problem between us, Renard. We aren’t children—”

“Kit!”

I clamp my mouth shut and turn to see Martel behind Renard. Ah. That explains the absolute death glare Renard has been giving me since I opened my mouth. “Martel,” I say in greeting. “I didn’t see you there.”

“What’s got you wandering about on your own?”

“Just . . . looking for a hot meal,” I lie. “Care to join me?”

Martel opens his mouth, only for Renard to jab him in the side and give him a look. What’s that about? I frown as I watch them.

“Sorry,” Martel says, though he looks confused. “We’ve a few things to do before we leave.” He points to a building nearby. “That place there’s the best if you are wanting something to fill your belly, though.”

I turn to follow his finger with my gaze. “Thank you,” I say with a nod. “I’ll see you later, then.” I glance at Renard, who is carefully not looking at me. I’m wondering how to extricate myself without getting caught in my lie, but my stomach chooses this moment to grumble, and I realize perhaps I was being more truthful than I realized. I decide I have enough time to grab a bite before I walk down to High Street and find Jeffrey Reuter—even if I have to eat alone.

Belly full and energy restored, I make the twenty-or-so-minute walk down to the bottom of High Street to find the house with the red roof. It’s a quieter part of the port town—perfect for worrying over my strange

interaction with Renard earlier. I hate leaving loose ends on such an acrimonious state of affairs.

As I get farther into town, I count a few houses with red roofs, but only one has number twenty-six on the doorjamb. It's a narrow building with two stories, as many of the others squished together along this road are. The brickwork is limewashed, and the door is painted a shocking blue. I wonder if Reuter chose that himself, or if he merely lets the house.

I step up onto the front doorstep and raise my fist to knock, only to realize the door is ajar. I stand there for a moment, not sure what to do. I decide the most polite thing to do is knock anyway, so I step closer and knock on the inner frame of the door. "Hello?" I call.

When no one answers, I take one more step and nudge the door open. "Hello? Mr. Reuter?" I lean inside and see him—or who I assume to be him—sitting at a table in the next room with his back to me. "Mr. Reuter?"

Again he doesn't answer. I step inside, not sure what else to do at this point. I note the two empty mugs on the table in front of him and realize he must be passed out, drunk. Perhaps I can leave a note? "Mr. Reuter," I say again, setting my hand on his shoulder.

At my touch his shoulder drops—and then the rest of him follows. He falls to the side, and I am caught entirely off guard. I try to catch him but slip on something wet and go crashing to the floor.

"Brilliant," I snap at no one. I push myself up, but this time my hand slips, and I hit the floor once more with a grunt and a few choice words. The realization that the liquid under me is warm sets my skin crawling. Has he pissed himself?

I raise my hands in disgust—but then my heart skitters to a stumbling halt. I can't breathe. I have actually forgotten how. I can only stare at the thick, blackish-red liquid on my palms and running down the sleeves of my finest coat.

My throat constricts. I gag, but I clamp my mouth shut and swallow hard to keep from throwing up. The sickening scent of metal rushes up my nose as I push Reuter off me and scramble back across the floor, slipping

twice more on the ever-growing pool of blood beneath us. How could this be happening?

He's staring at me as he lies on his side, his eyes wide and still. Blood drips from the red-soaked blond curls on his head, and I can hear the sickening *tap*, *tap*, *tap* of each droplet hitting the floor. His mouth hangs open, as if he died with a scream on his lips—but he couldn't have, could he? Surely someone would have heard it? Surely *I* would have heard it . . . ?

As my gaze moves to the open gash across his throat, the realization that his body, like his blood, is *still warm* sets my pulse racing even faster. His body is *warm*. His blood still flows from the tear in his throat. He was killed mere *moments* ago.

And I could be next.

I haul myself up using the table, leaving a handprint of blood on the worn wood. Two mugs; his killer was *just* here. They were *drinking* together. He could very well be in the house still! How long does it take a body to cool after death? How can this be a question I'm asking myself?

I still can't breathe. I look at Reuter and the pool of warm blood at my feet, and bile bubbles up in the back of my throat. I wish, more than ever, that I had taken one of the twins with me.

No—I wish I had never come searching for Jeffrey Reuter.

I need to get out of here.

I need to *run*.

The killer is almost certainly *in this house*, and he must know I was looking for Reuter. I cannot fathom how, but it's the only way this makes any sense. I am most certainly next. This whole setup is a warning—why else would he wait to kill Reuter until *seconds* before I arrived?

I slip once more in the blood, and for the first time a sob escapes me. I can't help it.

I run from the house, slamming the door open as I careen through the doorway. I'm not even sure my feet touch the ground as I rush down the front steps. Blood chases me in the footprints my boots leave behind as I

run back into town as fast as I can, Jeffrey Reuter’s silent death scream forever seared into my memory.

And the shadow of his killer close behind me.

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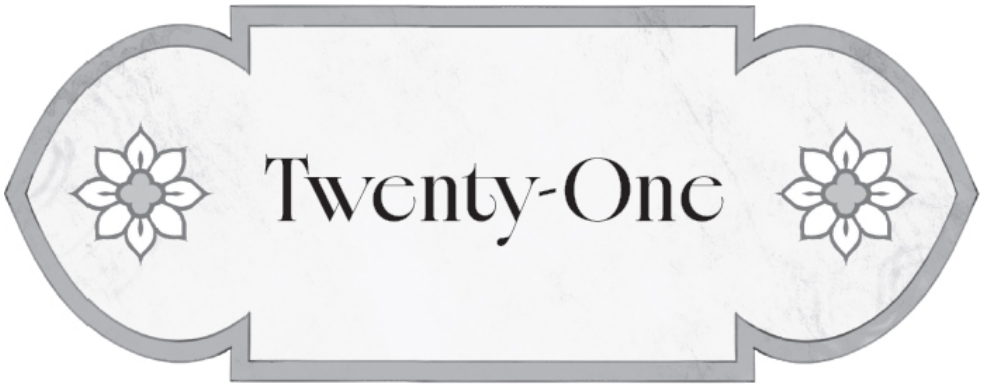

My lungs burn with the exertion of running. Accidental pirate or not, I was still bred a gentleman, and we are simply not built for activities like running for our lives on cobblestone in *heels*. I don't even know where it is I'm running to. I've entirely forgotten the name of the inn where I was meant to meet Captain Sharpe, and I'm not brave enough to slow down so I might read the street signs.

The port isn't *that* big. If I run long enough, surely *someone* who knows me will come to my rescue. Despite my hoping for exactly this, when a hand *does* shoot out of the crowd to grab at the back of my jacket, I can't help but scream. I try to wrench away, but another hand covers my mouth, and moments later I am dragged off the street and into a tight alley that smells of piss. I flail my arms to fight my assailant off—it is just *too* much to be attacked like this on the very same day I've nearly witnessed a murder!

"Mr. Kit!" a familiar voice hisses in my ear, just as the back of my hand makes contact with a face. I stiffen and open my eyes. The alley is shadowed by the buildings; even now in the afternoon light, it is hard to see who stands in front of me.

The red hair is a giveaway, though, and heat floods into my cheeks and chest. “I’m sorry,” I blurt. Christ—have I ever *blurted* before?

“What’s happened?” Trevor asks, even as he’s rubbing his jaw. A little dramatic; I know I didn’t hit him that hard.

“Mr. Kit, yer covered in blood,” Tristan says from behind me, releasing me to put some distance between himself and my blood-soaked clothes.

I can’t answer. My chest is heaving, my head spinning. I try to explain, but instead I am just spluttering and humiliating myself as tears come pouring down my cheeks all at once. I am so relieved it’s the twins who found me. While I am sure they will tease me later for crying in public, they won’t do it in front of the other men.

“Trevor, find the cap’n,” Tristan says, pulling my jacket off my shoulders.

Trevor stares at me for a moment, then nods and flees from the alley.

“My clothes are ruined,” I sob, because I can’t bring myself to talk about Jeffrey Reuter’s body and the blood pooling beneath it. I want to erase the image of his hollow, terrified eyes as they stared through me.

“Come on, let’s get ye out of sight,” Tristan says. I hear the rustle of fabric as he pulls my purse from the jacket pocket. Then he abandons my best jacket in a puddle of what I am certain is urine. “What do you have in here, rocks?” he grumbles.

“Yes,” I whimper—and, bless Tristan, he laughs.

I am not quite far enough along in my life as a pirate to laugh in a situation like this. I’m not sure I *ever* want to be that far along . . . though at the same time, I wouldn’t mind having the ability to find the humor in this moment. As it is, I am struggling just to think over the pounding of my pulse in my ears and the ache in my chest.

I try to control my breathing as Tristan hauls me through a door at the back of the alley. “You, lad,” I hear Tristan say, and some inner voice allows me to recognize the irony of sixteen-year-old Tristan calling anyone “lad.” But then a boy of about twelve approaches us, his brows high as he

stares at me. I can't tell if it's the blood or my wretched crying that has him so horrified, but either way, I suppose he is right to be so.

"I need a room," Tristan says, digging into the purse to pull out a few coins. He drops them into the boy's hand. "There's an extra shilling in there for ye if ye tell no one that doesn't look like me."

Clever. Tristan is so clever when he wants to be. If I weren't still trembling from shock, I might praise his quick thinking. As it is, all I want is to be safe behind a locked door and to get out of these bloody clothes.

Moments later I get my first wish.

The bolt sliding into place is exactly what my heart needs. I grab on to the back of a chair in the middle of the room and hunch over, still panting. The room is spinning, and I don't want to be sick.

Tristan wisely says nothing. He just gives me space and waits by the door. But he doesn't have to; as my body recognizes I am safe, my mind automatically slips back to the horrible thing I just saw. I can't stop it. I let out a strangled sort of sob and turn to find a bedpan.

It's nearby, thank Christ. I drop onto my knees beside it, and then every last bite of the lunch I ate less than an hour ago empties from my stomach.

Captain Sharpe arrives sometime while I am retching into the bedpan. I can hear him and Tristan whispering behind me each time I manage to stop long enough to breathe. Then I am hauled to my feet once more, but I recognize Sharpe's hands, so I don't fight him. I turn toward him instead and, God help me, I bury my face in his shoulder.

"What happened?" he asks. His voice is quiet. I hear the click of the door as Tristan leaves us. At some point one of them shuttered the windows and lit the sconces on the wall and the taper on the bedside table. The room has an eerie, flickering glow to it, casting haunting shadows on the walls around us.

“I don’t know.” I’m amazed the words come out without too much shaking. Sharpe is breathing slowly and deeply, and my body responds. My pulse seems to slow and my breathing evens out, like his. I am safe. I am safe, and he will know what to do. “He was dead when I got there.”

Captain Sharpe’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows down the implication of what I’ve said. “How?”

I lift my head. He’s staring at the dingy wall, not at me. Somehow that’s a relief. I don’t think I could maintain eye contact while talking about this. “Someone slit his throat.” I can’t bring myself to say it any louder than a whisper. “He . . . he was still *warm*.”

Sharpe’s arms tighten around me. He narrows his eyes, and the set of his jaw goes rigid. Finally he looks down at me. “You weren’t hurt?”

I shake my head, because I can’t answer that question out loud without crying again, and I don’t want to appear any more ridiculous in front of Captain Sharpe. Not unless I’m doing it on purpose.

He nods as he studies my face in the dim candlelight, as if to confirm that I’m truly not hurt. “I shouldn’t have sent you alone.”

“I’m all right,” I manage to whisper.

“You were smart to run,” he says, as if he thinks I need to hear that. But I know I was smart to run. I don’t feel foolish or guilty for running. I nod in agreement, and he heaves a great sigh. “We’ll wait here until dark, and then I’m bringing you back to the *Deliverance*. Too many people saw you for you to remain here at port.”

I hadn’t thought of that. My eyes widen. “I won’t be suspected of his murder, surely.”

“You’ll likely be the only suspect, Kitten,” Sharpe says with a frown. Then he lifts one hand to brush my hair off my forehead. It’s a strange gesture. It disarms me. No one has ever touched me quite like that before.

I pull away from him, but I try to make it look like it’s because I want to tie my hair back, not because his tenderness is terrifying me. I smooth some strands away, only to stop and release it with a little gag. “It’s in my hair.”

“I already sent Tristan down for a pitcher and basin.”

Thank the good Lord in heaven for Captain Sharpe. I offer him a dramatic sigh of relief in response and am rewarded with the soft rumble of a reluctant chuckle. “When he comes back up, I’ll leave you to wash and find you something to wear.”

I don’t want him to leave me alone, but I nod anyway. I can’t imagine that asking him to stay while I bathe would be anywhere near the realm of appropriate. “Thank you, Captain Sharpe.”

“You certainly keep me on my toes, Kitten,” Sharpe says. There is a tap on the door, and he opens it just enough to peek out, then all the way to let Tristan inside. “Keep him out of trouble, Tristan.”

Tristan smirks, as if he knows he’s capable of doing no such thing. “Aye, Cap’n,” he says to the closing door, before he sets the pitcher and basin down on the table.

The water is steaming, even in the Jamaican heat. I could kiss Tristan for that. I slide out of my ruined waistcoat and drop it onto the floor. Then I peel my shirt away from my skin, tugging it over my head, and drop it into the pile with my waistcoat. The blood has dried by now, and the sensation of it on my skin makes me shudder. “You’re a saint,” I say to Tristan as I step over to the table and lift the pitcher out of the basin. I pour some water into the bowl and set the pitcher down, then begin the work of cleaning my hands and arms.

“No one’s ever called me *that* before,” Tristan muses, taking a seat on the edge of the bed.

I wash as quickly and thoroughly as possible with the limited water I have. Back home, I could have a hot bath drawn for me in the large wooden basin by my fireplace. I could soak in water scented with rose oil or cinnamon.

I try not to think about this as I splash the last of the water into my hair for another rinse. I comb my fingers through it, pleased to find it free of blood, if not free of tangles. I work the worst of them loose with my fingers and squeeze the water out. With no ribbon to tie it back, I must leave my

hair loose around my ears and neck. I must look positively rakish—shirtless and wet, with my hair overgrown and loose.

I am suddenly very aware of my body, and of Tristan's presence, in a way that didn't occur to me when I was caked in blood and desperate to be clean. I turn to him and cross my arms—which is ridiculous, I know.

Tristan's brows rise, then he stands and tugs the blanket off the bed, offering it to me.

I accept it, despite the heat of the room. The water on my skin has cooled me enough that I don't mind wrapping the blanket around myself, and I decide to push off my stockings and trousers, too. I sit beside Tristan on the bed, wrapped in the dark, worn quilt, too exhausted to stand any longer.

He says nothing to me, and I say nothing back. We sit there for a while in silence, but it doesn't feel uncomfortable. It might even have been companionable, were it not for the weight of what I saw pulling at me. A chill prickles along my spine, spreading gooseflesh down my arms and thighs. I shiver and hug the quilt closer to me.

The longer we sit, the less in focus the room around me becomes. I am aware of my steady breathing, and the constant shift of Tristan beside me, but nothing else. I try to focus on my body, but the blood is draining from my extremities, leaving them cold, stiff, and cramped.

By the time I come back to myself, Tristan is absent—as are my bloody clothes. I am alone in the room with Captain Sharpe, who sits in a wingback chair at the center of the room with his jacket off and his shirt open, a pint of ale in one hand. I must make some small sound, for he turns my way and is on his feet the moment our gazes meet.

"You're awake."

"Was I asleep?" I ask. My throat hurts.

Sharpe shakes his head and pushes the pint into my hand. "You were . . ." he trails off, as if unsure how to answer. "Here. Drink this. We

need to get you to the ship while we still have the cover of dark. There's a shirt, trousers, and shoes for you to wear." He points to the second chair.

I drink the ale without questioning him, then hand it back with a few sips left. He hesitates but takes it and finishes it off in one gulp. "Come on, Kitten. Can you dress yourself?"

The question seems absurd, but I am too aware of the stiffness of my body to make any protest. I simply nod and push myself to my feet. Captain Sharpe takes my arm and helps me up, then holds on to me, as if afraid I might collapse at any moment.

Maybe I will.

I let him hold me up, and focus on grabbing the trousers, on sliding in one leg at a time. The more I move, the easier it becomes. I pull on the shirt, tucking in the front but leaving the back tail out, and step into the shoes. They are too big, but for the short journey to the dock, they'll do.

Then Sharpe's fingers are in my hair. The sensation rips me from my anesthetized, in-between state and right into the present. I gaze up at him, but he says nothing as he smooths my hair back as best he can, holding it in a queue at the base of my neck. It's impressive, considering we're facing each other.

I watch him tug the blue ribbon from his hair with his free hand, and in the next moment it's wrapped around my own dark waves and tied securely into place. "There." His voice startles me. "No one will look twice at you in these clothes," he says as he brushes a few loose hairs down to frame my cheekbones. "Let's get you back to the ship."

I never want him to stop touching me like this.

But then his hands fall away from me, and I am left feeling cold and empty once more. He pulls on his jacket and unlatches the door, waiting for me to join him before he opens it and ushers me from the room.

I don’t remember most of the night after Captain Sharpe smuggled me back on board the *Deliverance*. It’s just a blur of Sharpe’s voice, soft and low, his arms around me as I wept. When I wake in the morning, I am shocked to find him still abed—*beside me*.

I sit up in the sturdy mattress, heavy bedclothes rumpling in my lap. The curtains are drawn closed, but sunlight filters through them, giving the whole space a warm, cozy glow. I am still in the scratchy shirt and trousers Sharpe brought to me the night before, which means Captain Sharpe’s virtue remains intact.

Still, the shock of waking beside him has me reeling. I’ve never shared a bed with someone before. Of course I’ve had lovers—but never have I fallen asleep or awoken with another body beside me in my bed. I stare at Sharpe as he sleeps, unnerved by the sight. He seems peaceful in a way I have never seen him before. I have seen him relaxed, happy, and drunk . . . but never entirely at ease. It softens his features in a way that makes him look quite young.

I suppose that’s a silly thought; he’s only a few years my senior. But something about his presence makes him seem so much more worldly. I am tempted to lie back down and simply listen to his soft breathing, but his dark lashes flutter, and a moment later he is gazing back at me. I try not to think about the funny little flip my stomach does as our gazes meet and hold for longer than I am comfortable with.

Then he sighs and sits up, his movements slow and languid. “Kitten . . . ,” he mumbles, his voice gravelly with sleep.

I shiver a little despite the immense heat of the room. “Captain.”

He rubs at his face and pushes the bedclothes aside, then leans against the pillows. “I’ve called the men back. We’re leaving port as soon as everyone is on board.”

I blink at him, unable to wrap my head around his words for a moment because they aren’t at all what I expected to hear. “Have you?”

“After you fell asleep.”

So he didn’t just fall asleep beside me. He waited for *me* to fall asleep, left, and then *deliberately came back* and climbed into bed with me. Heat spreads across my face from temple to temple. I’m not sure what to say, but as I flip through various possibilities in my mind, a flash of lifeless blue eyes pulls a gasp from me, and my entire body tenses up. By now I’ve seen men die before, but something about Jeffrey Reuter’s death feels more real, more violent. More terrifying.

Sharpe, reading my thoughts as he always does, reaches out silently and draws me to him. “You’re safe, Kitten,” he whispers into my hair as I melt against his chest in a way that is both foreign and frighteningly familiar.

I nod, swallowing down the lump forming in my throat as he tugs the ribbon loose from my queue. His fingers in my hair are just too much, and I am overwhelmed with the need for more—but I dare not ask.

“What now?” I whisper.

“We’ll go to Port-au-Prince to resupply. Your friend Captain LaBarre is likely gone by now.”

My friend. I can’t help the smile that tugs at the corner of my mouth. “And from there?” I ask, relaxing a little more as my breathing begins to match his.

“From there we go to the colonies to sell whatever goods we have.”

“What about Jeffrey Reuter?”

“He isn’t my problem anymore.”

I lift my head to look up at Sharpe, and his fingers still on the back of my neck. “You aren’t concerned about who killed him? What are we to tell the men?”

“The men know what they need to. My officers are aware that he’s dead; they don’t need to know how. As for Reuter—my quarrel was with him. If he’s dead, it dies with him. I’m not about to stick around to solve his murder when the only suspect is here in my bed.”

Good Lord in heaven.

Again I am at a loss for words. It’s not a position I’m used to. Is Captain Sharpe flirting with me? Or is this just how he speaks when he’s unguarded?

A knock at the door saves us both from ourselves. To my further surprise, Captain Sharpe doesn’t shove me from his bed and scramble to his feet. Instead he simply turns his head and cranes his neck a bit as he calls, “What is it?”

“Breakfast, Captain,” Billy’s voice replies through the door.

“Breakfast,” Sharpe murmurs to me before he lets me go.

I miss his body against mine the moment he turns to slide from the bed, but my grumbling stomach makes a convincing argument about needing sustenance, and I move to follow him.

“Coming,” Sharpe calls to Billy, and I watch as the shadow across the stained-glass door moves away.

I glance to my trunk as Captain Sharpe sits heavily on his settee to pull on his boots. “I’ll be out in a moment,” I say as I step over to it. The purse full of stones is sitting on top of it, so I snatch it up and slide open the unlocked top drawer of Sharpe’s desk, swapping it out with my own. I reach in as I return to my trunk and fish out my key, then kneel to unlock it.

“Don’t be long, Kitten. Billy made maduros with the plantains you got him.”

I smile at that. “I won’t,” I promise.

He eyes me for a moment, as if wondering whether it’s safe to leave me on my own. I can see him staring at me in my peripheral vision. But as I begin to rifle through my clothes, selecting what I plan to wear for the day, he seems to decide I am fine to be left to dress. He gets to his feet, grabbing his jacket from the back of the settee and pulling it on in one smooth motion as he leaves the room.

And then I am alone, and the stuffy room seems to fill at last with enough air for me to breathe.

Ten minutes later I am dressed in a fetching pair of violet trousers, a clean white shirt, and a lavender waistcoat. These colors never fail to cheer me, and I think I will have the crew less worried if I reappear looking more foppish than ever.

I step out on deck and am surprised to see the twins, Billy, Captain Sharpe, Mr. Tydes, Cook, Rodriguez, and a few other men all perched or standing around with plates in hand. It's strange to see them all in one another's company like this. It's also strange to see them taking breakfast on deck.

We are no longer docked at Port Royal but instead anchored some hundred yards or so out to sea. A skiff is making its way slowly across the water toward us. This must be what Captain Sharpe meant when he said he'd called the men back. If they see the ship anchored instead of docked, they will know something is wrong and return quickly.

Billy is the first to see me. "Kit!" he exclaims, grabbing a plate for me as I approach.

"Good morning, Billy," I say as I take the plate with a smile. "Are these your famous maduros?"

"My *mother's* famous maduros," he corrects me.

"Of course, forgive me," I say as I pick one up with my fingers and examine it. They smell delicious. Golden brown in color, the outside feels crispy and a little greasy on my fingertips. I take a bite out of it.

I have eaten bananas before. They aren't common by any means, but my father's status means connections to people with connections. Through various journeys and trades, my family was exposed to things from other countries in small but frequent doses. I remember enjoying bananas every time I ate one, but I can't recollect the exact flavor.

As I chew the maduro, which is lightly crisped on the outside but soft and warm inside, I know with certainty that *this* flavor is quite different.

The outside has a caramelized sweetness to it, and the inside is velvety against my tongue. I eat the second half of the slice I'm holding and nod enthusiastically as Billy watches. Both texture and flavor are delightful.

"Billy, this is delicious," I say after swallowing.

He pats my shoulder. "There's plenty," he says. "Have your fill."

"Trying to fatten me up?"

Billy chuckles and picks his own plate back up. "A little meat on your bones is never a bad thing."

"I've plenty of meat on my bones," I say.

He laughs again, but I can tell by the tone of it he isn't laughing at me, but rather out of sheer happiness. I laugh as well, and as he returns to Rodriguez and Captain Sharpe, I join the twins, who are both fastidiously licking their fingers.

"Good morning," I say.

"I forgot what ye look like when ye aren't pukin'," Trevor says kindly.

Tristan kicks him but laughs anyway. "Yer lookin' fancy."

"I'm feeling fancy," I say as I sit on the deck beside them.

Tristan instantly snatches a maduro from my plate and crams it into his mouth. "Cap'n says we're goin' to Port-au-Prince as soon as everyone's back."

"He told me," I say, after shooting him a glare and turning away to protect my plate. "How many men are we still waiting for?" I can see that much of the crew is here, either eating or working in the rigging. I'm sure there are more belowdecks.

"Just one er two."

I can hear the splash of oars now, and a moment later the low thuds and clunks of men climbing the rope ladder to come aboard. I can't see who's climbed aboard from where I sit, but someone calls "Everyone accounted for, Captain!" over the clamor of the skiff being hauled back into place.

I get to my feet once I finish my food, brushing off the back of my trousers. Then I turn—and see Renard making his way across the deck, looking harassed and tired. Apparently, he is once again the last of the men to return from port. The glance he shoots my way is brief but irritated. As he disappears belowdecks, I am left wondering if I imagined the expression on his face, or if I have somehow mishandled this entire situation.

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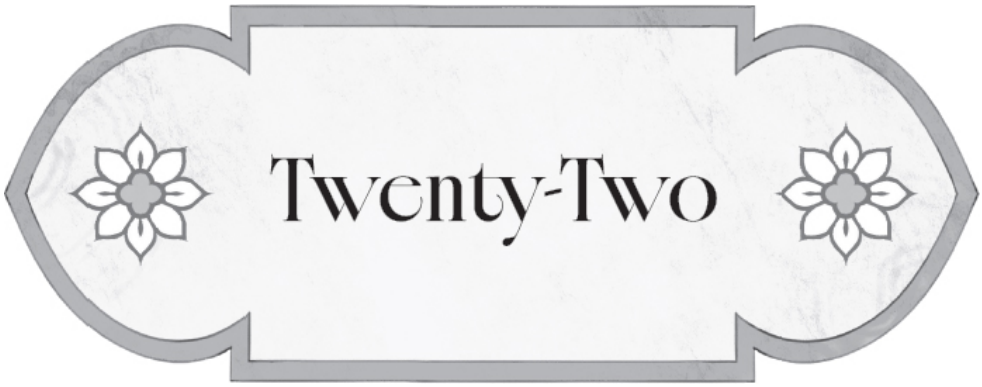

Becalmed.

"What does that mean exactly?" I ask two days later. I am sitting on the settee in Captain Sharpe's cabin, my and Jeffrey Reuter's ledgers spread out across the low coffee table. It's especially hot today. I've dressed down to a pair of knee-length olive breeches, a light shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and a brown-and-gold waistcoat, which I have entirely unbuttoned and allowed to hang open. It's so hot that I have removed my stockings and shoes and am seriously contemplating removing the waistcoat as well, which is superfluous if it's not properly done up.

Captain Sharpe and Mr. Tydes both turn from the captain's desk to face me. Mr. Tydes grimaces, but Captain Sharpe looks resigned. "We've lost the wind."

I blink at their expressions, then adjust my body so I might face them without twisting my spine. I lean against the back of the settee and squint at them. "Is someone . . . looking for it?" I ask, realizing only as the words leave my mouth how daft I sound.

Captain Sharpe's mouth falls open, and he takes in a breath as if he might answer me . . . but then he squints back at me and closes his mouth

once more. Now we're both confused.

"We're stuck in place until the wind picks up again," Mr. Tydes explains, all but rolling his eyes at us both.

"No wonder it's so hot," I grumble.

"It's only going to get hotter," Mr. Tydes offers.

What a cheering thought.

"Well, how long do we have to wait?"

"I'm not a mystical being, Kit. I don't control the wind."

My brows shoot up and I sit a little straighter. Mr. Tydes has never been quite this bitchy to me—at least, not since the day he tricked me into boarding this ship. "Ah."

Sharpe sighs and leans back in his chair. "We're a day, perhaps two, away from Port-au-Prince. I'm not going to worry yet; it's only been a few hours."

"The men are getting antsy," Mr. Tydes says with a frown. "And we're low on supplies."

I'm beginning to realize that this is more serious than I first thought. Mr. Tydes appears genuinely concerned, and though Sharpe says he isn't worried, there are creases between his brows as he stares down at his desk over steepled fingers.

"Tell the men—"

"All due respect, Reggie," Mr. Tydes says. "The men are spooked after Port Royal. They're talking about the curse. I think you should say a few words."

Reggie? I've never heard anyone use Captain Sharpe's Christian name before. In fact, I'm not sure it even occurred to me that he *had* one until this very moment. I've shared a bed with this man—albeit purely platonically—and I had no idea his given name was Reggie. What is it short for, I wonder? Reginald? I wrinkle my nose as I consider this. He doesn't look like a Reginald. What a stuffy name for a man like Captain Sharpe.

Sharpe sighs and gets to his feet. "Kitten, put the ledgers away."

“Aye, Captain,” I say, but I don’t move yet. I watch him don his hat and his jacket, despite the heat. He opens the cabin door, glancing back at me once before following Mr. Tydes out on deck.

Once I have the ledgers closed and packed away in the locked drawer, I step out to join them. The crew is already gathered. I can see Tristan hanging upside down in the rigging, his shirt hanging precariously and revealing part of his belly. Trevor sits beside him, balanced with his feet and hands wrapped around the ropes on either side of him.

“. . . to use this time to our advantage,” Captain Sharpe is saying. “We’ve lost the wind in the doldrums before. It’s rarely been more than a day or two before she picks back up. In the meantime, let’s get the sails down one by one for repairs. Get the decks swabbed and tend to the rigging.”

Most of the men are listening to him, but I can see a few whispering among themselves. Their expressions are ones of fear and concern, but nothing seems mutinous.

Yet.

As Captain Sharpe finishes addressing his crew and the men spread out to get to work, I see Renard watching me from across the deck. I frown at him, and he sends another discomfited grimace my way before we are both distracted by a growing commotion among the men. I turn to follow the sound and smile at the sight of them tossing water from the buckets, intentionally splashing one another. It reminds me of my early years at Eton, when my classmates and I would run wild in the rain on hot summer days, wrestling in the mud.

Trevor drops himself from the rigging and reaches for a bucket, but he’s soaked a moment later. I burst out laughing. Mere moments ago it felt as if tensions on the ship were rising, and now there is a carefree lightness among the men as they cool off with seawater and playfully shove one another around.

I’m still chuckling when I turn back to Renard, only to find him gone. I spin around, but he’s nowhere in sight.

“Mr. Kit!” Tristan calls to me—and, distracted as I am, I can do nothing to defend myself or my silks as a bucketful of icy seawater comes crashing down over my head, soaking me through to a chorus of raucous laughter.

In the evening, after I’ve let the men have their fun ruining my clothes by holding my arms behind my back as they toss water over me, I am exhausted and chilly but in a pleasant mood.

It helps that Cook has arranged something unexpected for dinner. Though the delicious aroma in the galley is enough to get the twins nudging me with excitement, I am still delightfully surprised when he hands me a plate of chicken dripping in a familiar golden sauce and paired with a generous chunk of bread. I lift my gaze to his, and he narrows his eyes at me.

“Be careful,” I say with a widening smile. “I may just fall in love with you if you continue in this way.”

“Get out of my kitchen, ya wee shit,” he says—but there is a laugh behind his words, and I cannot help but chuckle myself as I hurry out of the galley with the twins close on my heels. As we reemerge on deck with our plates, I am greeted by more than one nod of approval from the men around me. Despite my clothes still being soaked and clinging to my skin, warmth blooms in my chest as I settle on the stairs by Captain Sharpe’s cabin with Tristan and Trevor and start in on my dinner.

I am quite sure nothing can ruin this moment for me. I sit with the crew, enjoying the brilliant colors of sunset as we eat our meal and watch the skies for any hint of wind. We find none, but the mood continues to be one of fairly good cheer.

After, when the sun has finally disappeared behind the horizon and the skies begin to darken, I retire to Captain Sharpe’s cabin. I shiver as I peel off my still-soaked shirt and cross the room to drape it over a gun mounted on the wall.

“Kitten,” Sharpe grumbles from where he sits on the settee. I glance over my shoulder. He stands, marches over, and plucks my shirt from where it hangs. “My guns are not a drying rack for your clothes.”

He drapes the shirt over a crate on the floor instead and inspects me. He doesn’t move, and I am all too aware of the assessing look in his eyes.

“What?”

“Nothing, I . . .” He lifts his gaze to meet mine and raises his brows. “You’ve filled out a little.”

“I beg your—”

Before I can finish, he reaches out to brush the backs of his knuckles along my upper arm. I stop short and shiver, then let myself look at where he’s touched me. I understand now that he isn’t suggesting I’ve eaten more than my fill, but rather that my shoulders and arms have gone from the slim form of a genteel youth to the broader form of an athlete. I’m nowhere near as fit as the other men on board—even Tristan and Trevor have stronger arms and shoulders than I—but I’m pleased all the same.

“Ah . . . I *have* noticed my jackets are a little less comfortable than they were when I first boarded,” I say. “I had chalked it up to the heat and humidity.”

Sharpe chuckles, a low rumble that sends another chill coursing through me. “You’ll have to laze about more and be less helpful if you want to fit into them again,” he says, amused.

“Or I could have them tailored out,” I say, chuckling.

“Mmm, clever lad,” Sharpe murmurs, bumping my chin with his knuckle before he steps past me to go back to the settee.

I’m still smiling as I make my way to my trunk to find a shirt to sleep in. I pull it on, then tug off my soaked breeches and dig about for a new pair. I slide into a navy-blue pair with light blue trim, leaving my feet bare and my shirt untucked as I carry the rest of my sodden clothes to the crate with my shirt and drape them as well.

“I’m done for the night,” I hear Sharpe sigh from behind me. I turn to watch him roll up the map he was studying. He carries it to his desk and leaves it there beside his spyglass, before making his way slowly across the cabin. “Let’s go to bed, Kitten.”

I shiver again as I watch him, his movements slow and lazy—like a man without a care in the world. I glance at the welcoming mattress and pillows, and I can’t be sure whether he’s inviting me to bed with him or merely suggesting that we sleep. The night before I fell asleep on the settee while he was still out on deck.

He lets his gaze fall on me after tugging off his boots, and neither of us says a word as he straightens and works off his belt, untying the worn leather and lowering it, and the weapons attached, to the floor. His gaze is intent on mine as he waits for my answer. I’m not sure why I hesitate; a few weeks ago I would have leapt at the opportunity to climb into bed with this man. But this invitation, this look in his eyes, the way his body has taken on a relaxed posture, as if he’s trying to hide the fact that he’s waiting for my answer . . . all of it is suddenly too much.

My body decides for me. I leave my wet clothes where they are and approach the bed, trying not to be too obvious that my breath is now coming in shaky, panting gasps. This is daft. The way I am like a giddy schoolboy about to be kissed for the first time is daft. We don’t break eye contact, even as he takes my elbow and helps me up into the bed, his lips curling into a dangerous little half smile.

He pulls his shirt over his head by the back of his collar in one smooth motion, and all at once I cannot breathe. I take in the sight of him in the dim candlelight, and it’s an effort to remember to inhale. He could be carved from marble. Every scar and blemish is beautiful. I want to reach out and touch him, but I can’t bring myself to.

I do let my gaze rake over the tattoo that winds up his right arm. Two thick lines wrap around his forearm, a series of zigzags, swallows, and symbols I can’t quite decipher in the dim light, until the intricate lines along

his shoulder give way to a large compass entwined with an anchor across the right side of his chest.

The mattress shifts beside me as he joins me in the bed. The curtains close, whatever dim light the sconces offered is snuffed out, and the markings on his body disappear into shadow. My heartbeat is deafening in the dark quiet of Captain Sharpe's bed. And then his hands are on me, and the world around us falls away.

He pulls me close, spooning me to his chest with one arm around my waist, his hand spread across the side of my stomach. I give myself over to him, resting my head on the pillow and leaning my weight back against his.

I think for a moment we aren't going to say anything, that we'll simply lie like this until we fall asleep. Honestly, that would be fine—but I find myself turning my head to look back at Captain Sharpe, and his eyes on me are heavy, the deep brown of them almost black in the dark. My breath hitches, and then I am twisting in his arms to face him.

He helps make the movement smooth, so I don't ruin the moment by elbowing him or getting caught in the bedclothes. I just stare into his eyes for what seems like an eternity. And then I realize nothing is going to happen unless I make it happen, so I close the distance between us until his breath is warm on my jaw.

His chest heaves and one warm hand slides up my spine, along the back of my neck, and into the hair at my nape. He doesn't pull like Renard did; instead his fingers press into the tender spot there, and I gasp. Every inch of my body crackles like fire.

He bumps his nose against mine, and I know without him saying a word that he's waiting for my permission. I could cry. Perhaps I do. My whole face is so hot, I'm not sure I could tell either way, but I can't bring myself to speak, so I just nod and bring my hand up to rest on his neck, under his ear, where I might brush my thumb along the stubble at his jaw.

And then our mouths collide, and I am lost in him. It isn't a slow, gentle kiss like the first time I kissed Katherine. It's fierce, and intense, and wonderful. For a moment I imagine this is exactly how it feels to be drawn

into the ocean by a siren’s kiss, to be drowned as she steals the breath from your body.

When we finally break away, we are both panting. He presses his jaw to my temple and holds me tight to his body, his fingers massaging that tender spot on the back of my neck in a protective, possessive way. I know in this moment I would give myself to him without hesitation, and without regret.

I release a breathless laugh, or maybe a sob. He hums in agreement as I bury my face in his neck. He shifts against me, and then my whole body shudders as his lips brush my ear and he whispers, in a voice far steadier than should be possible, “Good night, Kitten.”

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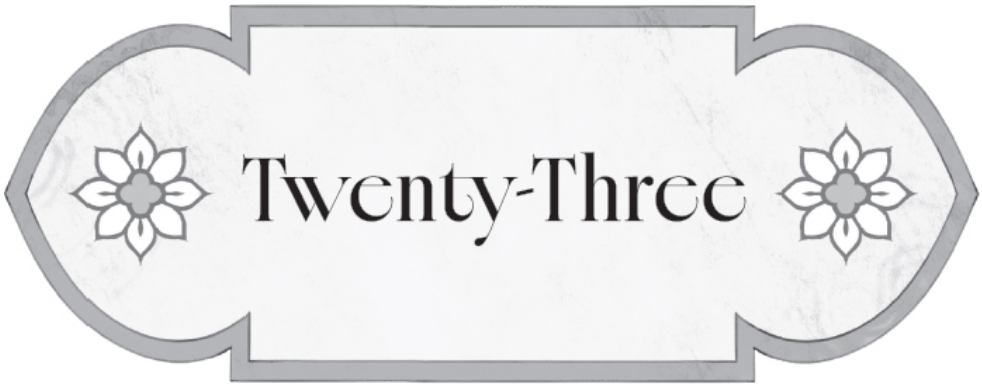

The next evening we arrive in Port-au-Prince, having apparently found the wind as I slept during the night. I woke alone in the captain's bed, which was disappointing, until he came into the room with a grin on his face and a plate full of breakfast for me.

We carefully do not discuss my sleeping in his arms last night, and I carefully do not suggest that if I'd woken in his arms as well, there might have been some gentle morning enjoyment between us. Still, his mood has remained buoyant all day, which has the men in good spirits as well.

Except for Renard.

Renard is eyeing me suspiciously as I linger beside Captain Sharpe under the stairs to the quarterdeck, holding a stack of papers as Sharpe, Mr. Tydes, and Billy discuss the letter of marque I've brought out to them.

Sharpe takes the papers from me and offers them to Mr. Tydes to look over. Then he touches my arm, and despite the innocence of that gesture, I find myself glancing around to see if anyone saw it. Sharpe has never touched me like this out in front of the men. In private, or with only the twins in the room, he has never held back, but out on deck he has always been careful.

Right now he isn’t being careful.

Mr. Tydes notices, but he says nothing—merely glances my way and lifts his brows before his gaze drops back to the papers. Billy, bless him, is entirely oblivious. But Renard saw. He saw, and he is staring straight at me.

Great.

“Did you hear me, Kitten?”

I jump and tear my gaze away from Renard to blink up at Captain Sharpe. “What?”

“I said we won’t be here long,” Sharpe says, frowning down at me. “I have business to attend to with Tydes.” He holds up the letter of marque. “The men are free to do as they like for the evening. You don’t have to stay on board, but best not to go off alone. Go ahead and get a hot meal with the men, Kitten.”

I nod. “All right.”

He smiles at me, and though I am all too aware of Renard’s piercing gaze, I can’t help the warmth that swells inside me at the sight of that particular smile—a smile Sharpe seems to reserve only for me.

He ruffles my hair, then turns to follow Mr. Tydes onto the dock with our paperwork. I notice then that the flag proudly displayed at our stern is the Union Jack.

Leave it to Captain Sharpe to hang a Union Jack while ported on a French colony.

A hand clapping down on my shoulder startles me out of my amusement. I gasp as I whip around to face Rodriguez, who grins broadly, all teeth and pretty blue eyes.

“You’re jumpy, lordling,” he says. “Join us for a pint.”

I sigh, putting a hand to my chest for dramatic effect. “Yes, very well. Let me get my purse.”

Rodriguez chuckles, and I realize that I’ve likely offered to pay for our drinks—but I can’t bring myself to care. I let myself back into Sharpe’s cabin and take my purse, then decide to wear my jacket. It’s hot, but I won’t

be caught in a French colony underdressed. I smooth my hair back into its queue and step back out, closing the cabin door behind me.

Twenty minutes later a group of seven of us are crammed around a table in a noisy tavern, and I am already shrugging out of my jacket. It's too hot inside, and in any case, there's no gentry around to be concerned about my state of dress.

Rodriguez holds up seven fingers to a barmaid, then leans back in his seat. "Drinks are on Mr. Kit tonight."

"How generous of me," I say as I carefully drape my coat over the back of my chair.

This earns me a laugh from the table, and I find myself smiling as I settle back into my seat—until I spot Renard stepping into the tavern. Our gazes meet, and I raise my brows at him. For a moment I think he's going to turn and run, but then Martel calls him over, grabbing a chair from a nearby table.

Renard sits down across from me, and I offer him a tentative smile. He gives a half-hearted nod in return and looks away.

Splendid. This isn't awkward at all.

I want to say something, as he's been avoiding me for too long, and it's becoming clearer every day that he would rather ignore me than apologize—but I can't say that in front of the crew. "I'm apparently paying for drinks tonight," is what I come up with.

He turns back to me and scoffs a little. "We should've asked fer the good stuff, then."

Well, it's something. I'm about to say something else when his attention is pulled away from me. I turn to follow his gaze.

"You lot sailed in with the Union Jack," says a young man with short dirty-blond hair and deeply tanned skin as he approaches our table. He has dirt smeared on one cheek, and his nail beds are filthy, but his clothes are clean. Not a sailor; perhaps an immigrant farmer. His accent sounds almost cockney—or rather, like it may once have been cockney.

I glance at Renard, but he doesn't seem concerned about the question. "Aye, we did. Who's askin'?"

"I'm Bobby," the young man says. "We 'eard a few weeks ago about the king. Still doesn't feel real."

"The king?" I ask, sitting up straight. "What about him? Has something happened?"

The young man looks at me, his brows shooting up. My accent has alarmed him, it seems. "A regular dandy," he observes.

"Quite. What about the king?"

"You 'aven't 'eard?" he asks.

I'm getting a little annoyed. "Clearly not."

"'E up 'n' died this past June. Prince 'Enry, or I guess it's King 'Enry now, took the throne with 'is lady wife."

My heart drops into my stomach. Henry has been made king? I knew it would happen someday, of course, but I'm shaken all the same. I wonder how much my father has benefited from his dear friend taking the throne. I wonder if Kitty has found a new match, or if I ruined her by fleeing. Now that she's the goddaughter of the king himself, her dowry will likely be far greater than it once was.

"First we're hearin' of it," Renard says, though his gaze is on me. "We've had nae news while out ta sea."

"What does it matter to us?" Martel chimes in. "They're all the same in the end."

"Look like you're gonna be sick," Bobby says to me, just as the barmaid appears with our ale.

"I'll be fine," I manage, reaching for my drink.

"Kenned him well, did ye?" Renard asks. I mislike the way he's assessing me. I don't want to talk about this, especially not here and now.

"Not very well, no," I say.

"Mm-hmm . . ."

Now everyone is staring at me. I ignore them, bringing my ale to my lips to swallow down a few large gulps.

“Any other news?” Martel asks Bobby, though he’s still staring at me. They all are. I can feel their gazes boring into my face, and I hate it.

“Oh yes,” Bobby says. “The seamen who came with the news brought wanted posters all the way from England.”

“Did they, now?” Renard asks a bit too loudly. All attention shifts to Bobby—thank Christ. “What’s he wanted fer?”

Bobby shrugs. “Wouldn’t say, but ’e’s wanted alive. No reward for ’is death.”

“Let’s see it,” says another one of the men (Christ, I can never remember his name. John? George?), and Bobby disappears into the crowd, presumably to find this wanted poster.

I’m not sure why they all care so much—unless they expect the *Deliverance* might want in on the reward. “Think it’s a large sum?” I ask.

“I imagine so, if they’re looking all the way down here,” Martel muses.

“Wonder what this man did.”

Martel shrugs. “Who cares? Money is money.”

Bobby returns with a few others and sets the sketch on our table. “Looks a bit like your fancy friend ’ere,” he says with a laugh.

Alarmed, I lean forward to examine the poster. I frown down at the face staring back at me. “Hardly,” I say. It resembles a young version of Prince Henry, not me at all. “The nose is all wrong.” Then my gaze falls to the bottom of the sketch, and I swear my heart skitters to a dead stop. “Ten thousand guineas?” I cry out. That’s an absurdly astronomical amount of money.

This, of course, piques the crew’s interest. Renard spins the poster to get a better look at it. Something flashes across his face for the briefest moment. “Mmm . . . he’s right,” he says with a grin. “One expensive haircut away from yer face.”

“It’s not my face,” I insist. “Besides, what could I possibly be wanted for? I haven’t *done* anything.”

Renard smirks at me in a way that puts ice in my veins. Is he taking the piss, or is he suddenly recalling our first conversation and reconsidering whether I was lying?

“Kit’s right,” Martel says as he picks the poster up. “The nose is all wrong. Kit’s is much bigger.”

I’m drawn out of my thoughts as I gasp and yank the poster from his hands. “How dare you, I have a beautiful nose!”

The poster is snatched from my grasp before I can take another look at it. John-George—Christ, I really need to be better about remembering names—laughs as he holds it up beside my face. “What if he’s been playing us this whole time?” he teases. “Mr. Kit is actually a hardened criminal.”

“Don’t worry, lordling,” Rodriguez chimes in with a wink. “Even for ten thousand guineas, we won’t let them touch you. You’re one of us now; you belong to the sea.”

I am just as touched as I am horrified by the declaration. I might smile at the promise of the crew’s protection were the idea of belonging to the sea not quite so disturbing.

“What could an almost viscount be wanted for?” Martel asks with a smirk, narrowing his eyes playfully at me. “Did you steal your father’s fortune and run, Kit?”

I glance around and give Martel a sharp look for announcing my title where others can hear. Outside of teasing, the crew haven’t seemed bothered by the truth of my identity—but we don’t know the men around us.

“Murder,” Renard says, and we all look at him. I laugh, because at first I think he’s recalling our first conversation upon the *Deliverance*. Finally offering an olive branch, perhaps?

But the look he gives me isn’t one of friendly teasing, and the laugh dies on my lips. “What are you on about?”

Renard sits back, a sneer twisting his handsome face. “Where’d ye go after the pub in Jamaica, *Lord Davenport*?”

This isn’t funny anymore. I can’t believe he has the absolute gall to accuse *me* of murder after avoiding me like the plague for days. I frown and toss a few coins onto the table. “I’m tired,” I say as I get to my feet. “I’m going back to the ship.”

“Ahh, Kit—we’re teasing!” Martel says, though he looks puzzled at the exchange.

I glance once more at the poster as I pull on my jacket, then snatch it from John-George’s hands before turning to leave with it. This elicits more laughter, and I am grateful that the group isn’t paying Renard’s odd accusation any mind.

I catch Renard’s gaze on my way out. He isn’t laughing; he’s frowning at me, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. Then someone’s ale tips, sloshing across the table, and the tense moment is broken as Renard jumps to his feet to avoid the wave of sticky liquid.

I step out into the stagnant evening heat, rolling up the wanted poster and tucking it into my jacket pocket. Though I dare not run and draw attention to myself, I walk back toward the docks as quickly as possible. I don’t want anyone else to see my face and agree that the chap in this sketch looks anything like me.

I hurry down the dock, grateful for the dark as I pass a small group of soldiers. I can’t get back onto the *Deliverance* fast enough. I wish I knew where Captain Sharpe went. I hate feeling this vulnerable without his strong presence to ground me. I’ve become dependent on him to help me keep my head.

Though I know the men were taking the piss out of me for laughs, the wanted poster still troubles me. It may not be a very *good* likeness, but . . . it *could* be me. What if my father is looking for me after all? Perhaps Elizabeth had another girl, and he finds himself without a spare and in need of his heir once more.

Or, more likely, perhaps the new King Henry is out for blood after I jilted his goddaughter the morning of her wedding. I shudder at the thought of him and my father working together to bring me home, just to make me suffer. Ten thousand guineas is an absurd sum for petty revenge, but I suppose men like King Henry and my father have little to do but flaunt their pride, count their money, and make those they deem beneath them suffer for their enjoyment.

As I cross the gangplank onto the *Deliverance*, I hesitate and glance over the edge, into the shimmering black waves. For a moment my stomach drops. I scramble onto the deck, shaking now from the rush of fear that overwhelms my senses. I make my way to Captain Sharpe's quarters, feeling queasy. A cool breeze caresses my face, carrying with it the whispered promise that I belong to the glittering dark below.

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Part III

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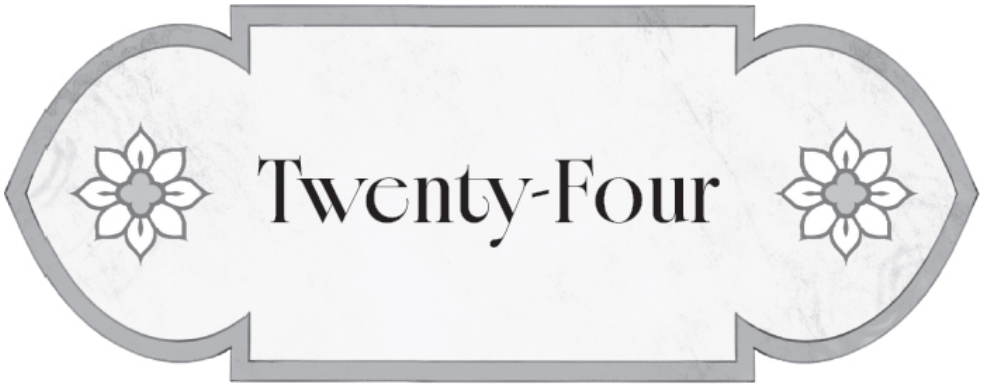

NOVEMBER 1700(ISH)

In the weeks immediately following the discovery of the wanted poster, I am plagued by nightmares of Jeffrey Reuter's silent scream, the fathomless black ocean, and—perhaps most disturbingly—my father. Though they have decreased in frequency over time, I still occasionally wake in a cold sweat, trembling and gasping for air like I am once again running for my life down the cobblestones of High Street.

This morning as I am jerked into wakefulness, Captain Sharpe's arms are already drawing me into his bare chest. I turn to him in the bed we now share and bury my face in his neck. His hands slide along my back, his even breathing steadying my own.

"You're all right, Kitten," he whispers into my hair. I know he is right, and yet as I allow my fingertips to trace the lines of his tattoo, it still takes my body some time to relax. I want to ask him about these designs, but his hands slide under my shirt, and his lips against my ear send hot chills through me. Finally, when I feel myself again, I tilt my head back in silent permission and his mouth is on mine.

He tastes like sea salt and last night's port. His weight on top of me is familiar and comfortable as he pushes me back into the mattress. I let my thighs fall open to accommodate his hips as he settles between them. This has become our daily morning ritual: gentle, slow explorations with hands and mouths. It has gone no further than that.

Not for lack of want or trying, of course. Once, Captain Sharpe had just managed to get his hand into the front of my trousers when the call of "Sail ho!" disrupted our attempts at amorous congress. We are likewise interrupted this morning: Just as Captain Sharpe rocks his hips forward to create the most perfect friction between us, there is a knock at the door. My moan dies in his mouth, swallowed by the growl he gives as he sits back. "What?" he calls.

"I need to talk to you, Reggie." Mr. Tydes.

Sharpe sighs and offers me an apologetic smile before he climbs out of the bed, pushing open the curtain to let in a rush of brisk November air. I gasp and pull the blankets up over my bare thighs, just in time for Captain Sharpe to pull a shirt over his head and say "Come in" without a thought for what it might look like to have both of us scrambling to cover up, with me still on my back in the bed.

Mr. Tydes, for what it's worth, is unwavering in his love for his captain—and therefore, tolerant of me. He spares me the briefest glance before turning to Captain Sharpe. "The men think they saw sails last night but couldn't tell in the fog."

"Who was on watch?" Sharpe sounds exasperated.

I slide off the bed, uncomfortably aware of my bare ass under my shirt as I move quickly toward my trunk to find a pair of trousers.

"Abe and Jacoby."

New members of the crew, with considerably less experience at sea than the other men. Sharpe nods as he tucks in his shirt. "Right. Let's go talk to them." He pulls on his boots and, much to my surprise, takes me by the chin and pulls me up for a kiss—right in front of his first mate. I deliberately do not look at Mr. Tydes as I return the kiss, then immediately lower my head

as I finish pulling on a pair of dark green trousers. As I search for a waistcoat in the pile, I hear the door click shut behind me.

Our progress up the British colonies was a slow one. We made our way from port to port, trading in goods stolen from trade ships. Now we sail in European waters once more. Our crew has grown in number over the last two and a half months. We have raided four ships, two of them carrying captives and two carrying goods. Sharpe's men dispatched the captain and crew of both slave ships, freeing the surviving captives and leaving them with a few men from the *Deliverance* to teach the others to sail. Others were welcomed into our crew, settling in far more efficiently than I had.

This, I have realized, is Sharpe's purpose on the sea. He is merciful to the crews of trade ships. They are rounded up and held at gunpoint as their ship is robbed, but they are left alive, unless they try something heroic. On the slave ships Sharpe is a different man. No member of the crew is left alive.

It's easy to tell what kind of ship we're approaching, even before the men board. You can smell the slave ships before you can see them, which gives the men plenty of time to prepare for an assault.

I don't take part in the raids, but after, the twins help me record everything we have taken or traded, including men. Those who have joined our crew are fiercely loyal to Billy and Captain Sharpe from the get, and they are welcomed by the crew without hesitation. I have had time to adjust to the title of pirate, though in truth I do very little real pirating. The men who joined us more recently are still confused about my role on the ship. I have heard them refer to me as the scribe in passing—but others have muttered less flattering things about the kind of services I provide to the captain behind closed doors.

At first, I admit, those comments troubled me. But as the weeks have passed with me permanently sharing Captain Sharpe's living quarters, and none—or almost none—of the crew questioning it, I have become less and less concerned.

Renard has committed to avoiding me, especially since Sharpe has begun to show his favor toward me in more public ways. It's a little like a pissing match at times, but Renard won't stand against his captain. Even if he is a right shit.

I still can't get his accusation out of my head, though. I'm too much of a coward to confront him about it—but surely he knows Reuter's death was not my doing. Captain Sharpe would have explained it to him. I can only assume he said it to be cruel. It feels irritatingly similar to the political intrigues with rivalrous classmates at Eton—but at least they never gave any false impressions as to their opinions on me. I considered Renard a friend.

"Ye missed breakfast," Trevor announces cheerfully as I step out on deck. The fog is dense and heavy; within moments, the hair at my temples is damp.

"Look at ye, in yer fancy jacket," Tristan coos, earning him a scowl from me. "Looks a bit tight."

He's right, it is a bit tight—but it's chilly, and I miss wearing my jackets.

Trevor tosses me an apple and leans against the stairs of the quarterdeck. "We miss ye bunkin' with us, Kit."

I'm not sure when he and Tristan stopped calling me Mr. Kit and got comfortable enough to call me just Kit. I don't think I noticed until sometime after it had already happened, but I'm glad for it. Spending time with them now feels much more like passing the time with my chums at Eton than worrying about the social hierarchy of the ship.

"I don't miss bunking with *you* lot," I say with a grin, before biting into my apple.

"Abe says he saw a frigate on the horizon last night," Tristan says, ignoring me.

"Abe shouldn't have been on night watch without someone more experienced," Trevor sighs.

“Renard knows better than to put two new recruits on watch together,” I say with a frown as I watch the shadows of Captain Sharpe and Mr. Tydes through the fog on the starboard bow, passing what’s likely a spyglass between them. “What was he thinking?”

Trevor shrugs. “Cap’n won’t be pleased,” he says. “We’re too near the continent for him to be so reckless.”

“Don’t let him hear ye sayin’ that,” Tristan whispers.

“What’s he gonna do?”

“Yer just feelin’ brave ’cause yer talkin’ to Kit, ’n’ he’s scared of Kit.”

“He’s not *afraid* of me,” I say with my mouth full. I swallow my bite of apple and wipe the corner of my mouth with my thumb. “He just finds me wanting.”

“He’s jealous ’cause the cap’n is buggerin’ you.”

That comment earns Tristan a shove from me, but he just laughs as he stumbles forward a step. The twins are the only people who know the truth about Captain Sharpe and myself, because when we find moments to sneak away into our hiding spot in the hold, I feel safe enough to tell them about it in hushed whispers. The truth being that Captain Sharpe is *not* buggering me . . . *yet*.

Trevor has no interest in men in that way, but he’s curious all the same. Tristan, however, is a wellspring of questions on the topic. Because they know so much, they tease me relentlessly when they think no one can hear them. I don’t mind, because they keep my secrets for me, though they assure me the men likely wouldn’t care much either way.

“He’s not—” is all I manage to get out before the boom of a nearby cannon rips through the air. No one on board has time to react before the entire ship surges—and the rigging overhead shreds, crashing down around us.

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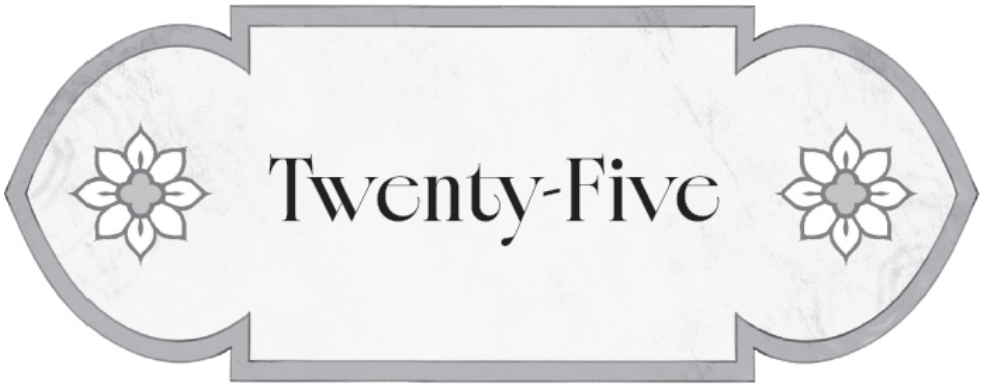

Tristan shoves Trevor and me under the stairs seconds before wood splinters and scraps of fabric plummet into the spot where we just stood.

“Was that a warning shot?” I hear someone yell.

“Get the new men belowdecks!” Mr. Tydes hollers. Oh God—the new men. None of them are trained in sailing or battle yet, and if we are boarded, they could be enslaved once more.

“We haven’t time to fly colors,” Trevor says, sounding terrified.

My gut clenches. He’s right. If we’ve been seen, they already know we aren’t privateers. If it’s truly a frigate like Abe says, all the men on this ship are dead unless we come up with something very clever, very quickly.

I turn to Tristan, but he’s gone. “Tristan?” I call, stepping out from under the stairs just in time to see Captain Sharpe emerge from the fog.

He hauls me into his arms and lets out a puff of air. “I saw the mast fall,” he says. I’ve never heard his voice sound quite so strained.

“I’m all right,” I say. “Tristan disappeared.”

“Tristan!” Trevor screams from behind us. “Get down!”

Everyone looks up—and though the fog is thicker now with dust particles and smoke, Tristan’s red hair is just visible as he moves through

the rigging with the Union Jack in his grip.

“Is he insane?” I gasp.

“Shit.” Sharpe pushes me at Trevor and is hurrying toward the remains of the mizzenmast, apparently intent on climbing after Tristan, when a second shot splits the air.

My heart drops into my stomach as I stare up at Tristan, willing him to hold on as tightly as he can, just as the cannonball hits the water on our starboard side and rocks the ship hard enough to send both Trevor and me sprawling.

I don’t hear a scream, nor do I see Tristan’s body come crashing down from the skies, but I can’t find him through the fog now. Trevor helps me to my feet as the *Deliverance* rocks back and forth, but I don’t waste time thanking him before I rush into Sharpe’s cabin to rifle through his desk.

I come up with what I’m searching for just in time to hear a single gunshot. Instinct screams for me to hide from danger, but I am running on pure terror now—and the men are in trouble. Captain Sharpe’s crew—*my* crew.

I hurry out on deck with the British letter of marque in my hand, holding it up in the air. “We have our papers!” I cry out.

How have they boarded us so fast? Captain Sharpe stands at gunpoint with his hands raised, looking grim as he stares down the barrel. I can’t stop myself from marching over to them, papers in hand. “I have our papers!” I say once more, then stop short as a gun is trained on me. This feels different than when Captain LaBarre boarded us. This feels *hostile*.

The papers are snatched from my grip, and I raise my hands to eye level the same way Sharpe has, my chest heaving. I want to say something else, but then an English officer steps forward and glances around at the crew until his gaze falls on me. His eyes widen, and he motions for the gun trained on me to be dropped.

I leave my hands where they are.

“Lord Davenport, I presume?” he says.

I am too stunned to speak. How on earth?

But then a familiar face appears from behind the officer, grinning dangerously at me. “Oui, that is him,” says Captain LaBarre. “The viscount’s son I told you about.”

Oh God. What have I done? I let my gaze flicker to Sharpe, who is staring at me with real fear in his eyes. Nothing could have prepared me for that expression on his face. I want to cry, but I feel frozen in time.

“I guess ye owe me that reward after all,” says a gruff voice from behind me. Without consciously deciding to do so, I spin around to stare at Renard. He’s standing with a roll of paper in one hand. I realize, with growing horror, that it’s the wanted poster from the tavern at Port-au-Prince.

“Renard?” I ask, my voice too quiet.

“You’re the man who met with Captain LaBarre?” the English officer asks.

“Aye, I am.”

“You claimed to have something worth more than the reward for Lord Davenport.”

“Aye . . . I do.”

I can’t imagine Renard has anything of the sort, but I also can’t think of anything to say. I am stunned silent.

“Renard, you slimy bilge rat!” Captain Sharpe snarls. “I should have pegged you as a turncoat and weighted your pockets!”

“Aye,” Renard says to him. “Ye shoulda.”

“I am Lieutenant Jonathan Elmsworth,” the English officer says, ignoring Sharpe’s outburst.

“Renard Campbell, nae fancy title,” Renard says as he pulls something from his pocket and holds it out to Lieutenant Elmsworth.

It can’t be. Every muscle in my body goes rigid at the remembered weight of that envelope in my pocket. The envelope with *Christopher-Henry* scrawled across it and the seal I never dared to break.

How is it in Renard's possession now? How did he even know about its existence? I try as hard as I can to remember ever mentioning it, but the only thing that comes to mind is the night I returned to Captain Sharpe's cabin to find my trunk open and the key in the lock.

The night after Renard tried to bed me. The night after he took "money" from my purse to pay for a whore.

I would be sick were there anything more than two bites of apple in my belly. As it is, those two bites are firmly lodged in my throat, instead of in my belly where they belong. As Renard hands over the envelope, I can see that the seal on it has finally been broken. A wave of nausea and disgust passes over me at the utter violation of Renard looking inside that envelope, while I never worked up the courage to.

Something inside that envelope is important enough that it brought the French *and* English navies here, and I have no idea what it is.

"My Lord Davenport," Lieutenant Elmsworth says as he takes me by the arm. "Your father has been searching for you for months."

"My father?" I ask in disbelief. I can't imagine my father going to such effort and expense on my behalf—not even to punish me. Nor did I realize he had quite so much pull as to involve the Royal Navy! Is this because of his friendship with Prince—no, *King* Henry?

I twist to catch a glimpse of Captain Sharpe one last time as I am dragged toward the rail of the *Deliverance*. "Is there any danger of your father chasing after you?" he asked me.

The look in his eyes now utterly destroys me. All at once my vision is blurred by the wet heat of tears as they spill down my cheeks.

I brought this upon them. This is *my* fault.

"Leave the crew be!" I cry out as a second officer takes my other arm in hand and ushers me forward. "They didn't know who I was. I lied to them to board the ship!"

My pleas go unanswered as I am lifted bodily onto the rail, then the world around me drops as I focus on the shifting water below. I am certain

the ocean will swoop up and swallow me whole if these men don't keep a firm grip on me. My fear paralyzes me, and I can't even tell them that I don't know how to swim.

I don't remember climbing down the rope ladder to the waiting skiff below, nor do I recall the process of boarding the English frigate the *Prince Henry*. All I remember is panic—in the knowledge that I would never see Captain Sharpe or Trevor or Tristan again, and that their blood was on my hands.

Renard's smug face stares back at me as we stand on the deck of the *Prince Henry*. It's begun to rain, and I am more downtrodden than ever as my fine silk jacket is slowly soaked through.

"You *knew*," I snap at him. "You knew that wanted poster had nothing to do with Jeff Reuter."

"Aye, ye took long 'nough ta figure that out. Ye dinnae have the bollocks ta slit someone's throat."

Oh God. He can't possibly know about that, unless . . . How had I not realized sooner? How could I be so utterly blind? "It was *you*," I whisper, shuddering at the memory of Jeffrey Reuter's dead eyes and still-warm blood.

"Aye," Renard growls. "He'da spilled his guts the moment he realized Cap'n was on ta him. Jeff Reuter was a coward, he was."

"Reuter knew where your stash was," I say in quiet realization. I bring a hand up to my mouth. I think I am going to be sick.

Before I can say more, the ship's captain approaches me, ignoring Renard as he bows his head to me in a surprising act of deference. I understand now that I don't outrank him as long as my feet are on his deck, but I won't say anything. Instead I lift my chin defiantly and narrow my

eyes at him. I am still reeling over my revelation about Renard and Jeff Reuter, my throat still burning with bile, but I can't let *him* see that.

"Forgive my men's rough treatment of you . . ." The captain seems to hesitate over my title, then eventually decides on, "My Lord Davenport. I am Captain Hale of King Henry's Royal Navy. I will be your escort home to England, where your father eagerly awaits your safe return."

Hang on—*Hale*?

Of course Digby's absolute weasel of an uncle was the one to finally catch up with me. What a joke. What an utter disappointment. I regret ever letting Digby Hale put his tongue down my throat.

I scoff, which seems to take him by surprise. "My father awaits my return as eagerly as an amputee awaits the surgeon," I say. "What's wrong, did Elizabeth have another girl and now he's desperate for his heir back?"

Hale's brow twitches as he stares at me. I can see him working through a few answers in his head before he replies. "I cannot speak to that, my Lord Davenport. You will have an audience with him yourself in a few weeks, when we return you to English soil. Until then Lieutenant Elmsworth will show you to your stateroom."

My stateroom?

I forgot what it's like to travel as a member of the peerage. I glance at Renard and narrow my eyes. "And him?"

"He will be . . . accommodated."

My gaze shifts back to Hale's face at that, and I can tell that something is amiss. There is something at play here that Renard doesn't know about. For all the effort he put into ensuring the Royal Navy would be able to sneak up on us in the fog, he still has not won himself a seat at the table.

Good. I hope he rots in hell.

"I want my envelope."

"That envelope belongs to your father," Hale says regretfully. "I'm not at liberty to return it to you, but I am sure all will be explained once you're safely home."

“What’s going to happen to the *Deliverance*?”

Hale’s brows rise as he stares at me.

“The ship you just *shot* at!”

“Let me worry about them,” Hale says as he waves a hand for me to be ushered away.

“Leave them be!” I shout over my shoulder. “If I find out any harm has come to them, I’ll bring my father’s wrath upon you!” Though I know my father will care nothing for the pirates who helped me escape his grasp for the last half a year or so, *Hale* knows no such thing. At my words, I can see his demeanor change, before he claps his hands together and begins barking off orders to the other sailors on board.

I am taken belowdecks with a man on either side of me, which makes it particularly difficult to maneuver our way down the stairs. But we make it, and I am led down a hall to a small door directly below the captain’s cabin.

Lieutenant Elmsworth opens the door, and I am unceremoniously pushed inside the room. It’s respectable. I realize in an instant that it’s meant for royalty; this is likely the cabin the royal family would stay in on their voyages. I’m rather shocked to be put here, viscount or no. It’s not appropriate for me to stay in a room of this quality, even if I am the highest-ranking person on this ship.

There are windows across the back gallery—likely smaller than the ones in the captain’s cabin, but this room is clearly meant to mimic his, to allow the royals comfort as they travel. The bed is quite like the one I shared with Captain Sharpe—the realization like a knife twisting in my chest. It isn’t very different from Captain Sharpe’s cabin at all, in fact, save for the lack of weaponry on the wall and its sterile, pristine state.

I whirl to face the door, but Elmsworth blocks the way, and the two sailors stand behind him with guns at the ready. “Your stateroom, my lord,” he says. “I’m sure you will find everything you need here. Supper will be served promptly at six thirty every evening, and breakfast at sev—”

“I know you don’t expect me to wake up for breakfast,” I snap, because I want to be a brat. I want to make this hard for them. I’m ignoring the ache in my chest in favor of being furious, and I will do anything within my power to inconvenience these men. That is all I *can* do.

Elmsworth stops and stares at me for a long moment. I think he is going to tell me to shut my mouth and eat when I am fed, but instead he grits his teeth and nods. “Breakfast will be brought to you by *nine* each morning.”

I cross my arms and stare back at him. “You plan to keep me locked in here like some common prisoner?”

“For your own safety, my lord. It’s not my orders but your father’s that you remain locked in for the duration of our voyage.”

“And how long will *that* be?”

“Approximately a fortnight. I’ll have something brought up to hold you over until supper.”

I want to argue further, but I know nothing will make him stay and do battle with me, so I simply stare at him with as much contempt as I can muster, even while my heart is breaking. He leaves the room, and I hear my short-lived freedom die an anticlimactic death with the sickening click of the lock.

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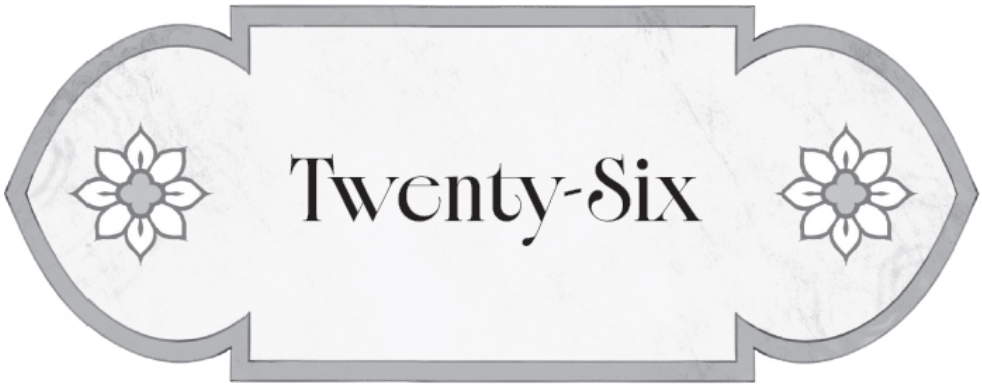

My stay on the *Prince Henry* is both short and never-ending. The days drag on, while the nights haunt me with visions of Jeffrey Reuter's dead eyes, Tristan falling to his death, and Captain Sharpe hanging for piracy. I barely eat; I can't stomach food at all in the mornings as I struggle to wake from my nightmares, and in the evenings I only pick at the plate they leave me.

No one says a word to me that isn't absolutely necessary. Lieutenant Elmsworth serves my meals, though most mornings I don't rise from the bed until I hear him lock the door behind him once more. I miss waking up in Captain Sharpe's arms. I miss his weight on me, and the way he always looked at me in earnest before we kissed, as if he needed express permission from me every single time.

I miss Tristan stealing my food and Trevor reminding me how daft I am. I miss Billy and his warmth and the way he laughed so freely. I even miss the grimaces of irritation and disgust Mr. Tydes would throw my way whenever I did something annoying enough to warrant a reaction.

What I *don't* miss is my old bedroom in Falmouth nor my father's dining table. I don't miss the gardens behind the house, nor dinners with

Victoria throwing food at me while Elizabeth pretends it isn't happening.

I don't miss the disdain in my father's eyes every time he looks at me.

I am familiar by now with the sounds of reaching port, so I'm not surprised when my stateroom door opens and Captain Hale steps inside. I am ready for him, my hair combed carefully back into a tidy queue, my clothes as perfect as I can manage without a proper valet. Eight months ago I might have tried to hide or talk my way out of this, but I understand now that I cannot keep running.

I stand and make my way across the room with my head held high. I won't let him see how terrified I am. I won't let him see that I want to curl up and cry and drink myself into oblivion. The sailors he brought down expected me to resist; I can tell by the way they exchange glances between themselves, then decide not to risk touching me and allow me to pass them.

None of them dare to grab me by the arm as I climb the stairs and cross the deck. The air is cold and sharp, leaving the taste of frost on the tip of my tongue. One man offers me a hand as I step onto the gangplank. I take it, not wanting to falter now and seem ridiculous. He guides me down the gangplank without a word, releasing my elbow as I step onto the dock, where two armed guards in the royal livery wait.

My stomach drops. "What's this?" I ask.

"You are to go with them," Captain Hale says from behind me. He motions to a carriage waiting at the end of the dock. "They will take you to see your father."

My father's influence over King Henry when he was still a prince must have been far greater than I realized. A new fear seeps into my bones at the thought of what he might do to me if he has truly risen so high in the months since my disappearance.

I swallow hard, but there is nothing for me to do but follow the royal guard to the waiting carriage. Just before I climb into it, I turn to gaze at the *Prince Henry* and wonder what happened to Renard. I haven't laid eyes on him since we stood across from each other in the freezing rain, he waiting for his reward and I mourning the death of Mr. Kit.

Of me.

I want to ask about the envelope. I want to ask about Renard. I want to ask about *my crew*. I want to look Renard in the eye and promise to watch him hang for what he's done. I turn to Captain Hale and catch a glimpse of the envelope he's holding, my name scrawled clearly across the worn paper. He hands it to another man in royal livery, and then I am ushered into the carriage before I can see where it ends up.

The London docks are as noisy and fishy as I remember from the last time I visited. I watch the crowd through the carriage window. I never noticed before how colorless London is. The people are grey. The food is grey. Even the sky is colorless, cast in an ever-lingering shadow of grey mist.

All at once I am homesick for the market at Nassau, which is ridiculous. I spent less than two days there, but it felt like home in a way nowhere but the *Deliverance* ever has. My breath hitches in my throat when I recall the taste of smoked honey on my tongue as the silk vendor called me the son of his sister. The riot of color and the taste of spices linger in my memories as both a cruel promise of what could have been and a whispered reminder of something I know I shall never forget.

I don't pay attention to how long the carriage ride through London takes. Though I'm staring out the window for the entirety of it, it's not London I am seeing. It's the streets of Jamaica and Nassau. It's the deck of the *Deliverance*, while the men throw buckets of water on one another to stay cool in the doldrums. It's the hallway belowdecks as the men celebrate another successful raid with ale and pipes.

And then we arrive. The carriage door opens, and a footman reaches in to offer me a hand. I take it and step out into the gloomy day to stare up at the mist-soaked brick of Kensington Palace.

Though I expect to be brought before my father immediately for a very public tongue-lashing, I am instead ushered inside and upstairs by way of the Denmark Staircase. I have been here before, for parties and private audiences with the prince and his wife in the Cupola Room. I have played with the children of the peerage in these galleries.

It is not the Cupola Room I am taken to now—nor the Presence Chamber, where I might have expected my humiliating dressing-down before the court. Instead I am taken through the Princess's Court, where I have never been. Eventually I am let into a set of apartments, and the footman who has silently guided me leaves without a word, locking the doors behind him.

The furnishings in these apartments are the finest I have ever seen, though I haven't time to admire them or wonder where my father may be lurking before I am ushered in for a bath. This, at least, I don't wish to refuse. I sink into the warm water and feel as though I may start to cry, but servants come and go behind the screen that has been set up for my privacy, so I make quick work of the grime on my hair and skin instead.

After, once I am out of the bath and in a new silk dressing gown, I find a comb and a black ribbon in the vanity. I smooth my hair back into a queue and wrap the ribbon around it a few times before tying it. I take in the sight in the mirror and frown at the man I see staring back at me. He looks like he could once have been me. But now I don't recognize him.

No, that's not right. It's Mr. Kit I see staring back at me, looking out from the shadow of Christopher-Henry. My skin has taken on a more golden shade of bronze, and something about my face seems . . . *more*. I can't explain it, but it's as if the childhood I clung to when I ran away from home just eight months ago has melted away, and now staring back at me is a young *man*.

I reach up to brush my fingers along my hairline, pulling free the shorter hairs Captain Sharpe always combed down to frame my face and watching them curl around my cheekbones. For a moment I wonder if I ought to try growing a beard. Wouldn't that be a scandal?

“You look different,” a voice says from behind me.

I whirl with a gasp, and there she stands, looking soft and pretty and very much the same as I left her—almost. I can’t help that my eyes drop immediately to the one thing that is notably different as she gingerly cradles her swelling belly in one white-gloved hand.

“Katherine,” I croak, standing before her in someone else’s dressing gown, still dripping from my bath, in what is quite possibly the most humiliating reintroduction in history.

She smiles. “Forgive me. I should have realized you’d be . . . indisposed. I just had to come see for myself. You really are here.”

“Ah . . . yes. And you’re . . . you . . .”

She follows my gaze to her belly. “They say I’m due in March,” she says.

I grimace at the timing. March, the anniversary of when we were meant to be wed.

“Congratulations,” is all I can manage.

“You’ve grown taller,” she says, ignoring my offer of good tiding. Fair enough; I deserve that.

“Have I?”

She steps into the room, and I am all too aware of the impropriety of us being alone like this. It shouldn’t bother me; it wouldn’t have bothered me eight months ago. I would have reveled in it—but now, something has changed.

I have changed.

I take a step back. “I’m not dressed, Katherine—if someone—”

“Kitty.”

“What?”

“I’ve told you to call me Kitty, remember?”

Oh God. “Ah. Yes. Kitty.”

“It’s all right. No one will be in here for some time; they’re letting you rest.” She walks over to the armoire at the far end of the room and opens both doors. “There should be clothing in here that will fit you, if you’d like to dress.” She turns to me with a coy smile—an expression I have never seen on her once-innocent features.

I rather like this new Kitty.

“Is my father here?” I ask as I approach the armoire, careful to leave an appropriate distance between us.

She bites her lip as she considers my question, though I’m not sure what’s so complicated about a simple yes or no. “Yes.”

“Is he with the king?”

Another hesitation. “Yes.”

I frown at her, but she turns away from me to sift through the silks inside the armoire.

“Ah!” she says, before I can question her further. “This here. This was always your color.” She pulls out an emerald-green jacket with gold and blush embroidery along the front and cuffs, then crosses the room to lay it out on the bed. “I always loved you in green. It matches your eyes so well.”

My eyes are not, and never have been, emerald green. They are a drab olive if anything, and more brown than that. But I don’t argue with her. I simply take a gold waistcoat from the armoire and join her at the foot of the bed, where she has opened a large trunk. She is about to kneel to reach into it when I lay a hand on her shoulder to stop her. “I’ll do it.”

She smiles appreciatively and steps back. “I’ll give you a moment to change,” she says. “Join me in the drawing room when you’re done. I’ve brought tea and sandwiches.”

Again she has surprised me. The Kitty I once knew always seemed nothing more than a handsome dowry and a pretty ornament on my arm. What a cad I was to think those things of her. I nod, and she leaves the bedroom in a whirlwind of ivory silks, closing the door behind her.

For a moment I can do nothing but stare at the ghost of her in the shuttered doorframe. Have I imagined her, or is this really happening? I am beginning to wonder if I died two weeks ago on the *Deliverance* from falling bits of wood and this is some kind of strange purgatory, testing me.

Shaking those thoughts from my head, I dig through the trunk until I find a pair of white stockings and breeches to match the jacket. I make quick work of dressing and slide into the shoes I was wearing before, even if they are a little worn and a little snug. After one deep breath, and a grumble of my stomach, I step out of the bedchamber and into the drawing room, where Kitty is sitting on the sofa with a cup of tea in her hand, watching the fire.

Not a dream, then.

I cross the room and bow to her properly, as I should have when she first entered the room. She is, after all, higher ranking than me—and a lady. I take her hand and press a kiss to her knuckles, where someone else's wedding ring gleams over her white glove.

"Who's the lucky gentleman who won your heart?" I ask her.

She smiles a little wider as she watches me. "After you left, King Henry was in such a rush to marry me off to save my reputation that he let me choose for myself," she says. "I chose Francis Stuart."

I remember Francis. A plain-looking chap, and a year younger than Kitty, but I recall him following her around like a lost puppy at social gatherings. "Your cousin Francis?" I clarify as I sit across from her.

"Yes."

"He's here?"

"He's hunting with Norfolk and Sandringham."

"Good time of year for it," I say. Or so I hear. I have no idea, nor do I care.

"So they say," she says, and once again I am charmed.

"And you're here . . . sneaking into my bedchamber with tea and sandwiches."

She laughs and sets her teacup down. “My lady’s maid knows the servants’ passages well. She sent for tea for her and me, then led me through to your rooms.”

“Scandalous.”

“Isn’t it just?” she agrees, laughing again.

I am at ease listening to the familiar sound of her laugh. I can remember now a time before I hated her, before my father announced his intent to marry us, when I would flirt with her and sneak into the garden with her at parties to steal a kiss under the moonlight.

Now she sits before me, round with another man’s child, and I love her more than I ever have. Her mere presence in these rooms is the one thing pulling my head above water.

“I’m so glad you came to see me,” I tell her, my voice softening. And then, as I watch her gaze at me, I feel, for the first time, a real sense of regret for abandoning her the way I did. “I wronged you so terribly. You should hate me.”

“Yes, many people have said that to me,” she says with a little nod, but she smiles down at her belly and strokes the delicate silk draped over it. “But I don’t hate you, Kit. I’m happy. I love Francis . . . and soon I’ll be a mother. I live in this beautiful palace, and after my lying-in, the king has seen fit to gift my family the dukedom of Cambridge.”

“Well, I suppose I did you a favor, then,” I say, and she laughs again.

“I suppose you did. Where did you go?” she asks. “Is it true you were kidnapped by pirates?”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Nothing quite so dashing,” I say softly.

“Will you tell me about it?”

I lift my teacup and stare into the steam as I consider how much I can safely tell her. I don’t know what happened to the *Deliverance* after I was taken. I don’t even know what happened to Renard after he betrayed me for ten thousand guineas. After he betrayed the crew . . . and my brave captain.

Damn this lump in my throat.

“I’ll tell you what I can,” I murmur. And after a long, fortifying sip, I set the cup down and brace myself to tell Kitty all that I can manage of my life for the last eight months without sobbing.

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At some ungodly hour of the morning, I am awoken by the sun barreling directly into my face. I groan and roll over in the large bed. I try to pull the blankets up over my head, but they are stubbornly resisting.

"My lord," an unfamiliar voice says. I jump and sit up with a start, looking around the room with wide eyes. A young footman stands beside the bed, holding my quilt hostage in his gloved hands. The room smells of tea and toast—and, blessedly, bacon.

"Your breakfast is here," he says, motioning toward the center of the room, where the wooden tub was when I fell asleep. Now a small, round coffee table and two wingback chairs sit in front of the fireplace, where a fire crackles invitingly. How have I slept through an entire redecoration of this room? It feels like I lay down only moments ago—and nightmares plagued my dreams so thoroughly, I am sure I did not sleep a wink.

"Ah." I'm not used to servants waiting on me like *this*. At home they serve my father, and I occasionally reap the benefits. Never before have I been served breakfast in my own bedroom. "Thank you."

I smooth back my hair and realize that at some point in the night I lost the ribbon holding it back. A cursory search yields nothing, so I leave it be

and slide out of the bed in my nightshirt, pushing it down to cover my bits and thighs.

Then the footman raises the silk dressing gown, and I hesitate. I've never seen a footman dress someone—that's usually left to the valet. But I suppose the disgraced son of a viscount wouldn't be assigned his own valet for his house arrest. I realize the only way forward that doesn't involve humiliating myself is to pretend I am accustomed to being waited on thus.

Once the dressing gown is tied about my waist, I step away from the bed and lift the silver cover from the tray on the little table. Salmon, bacon, an egg cup, and toast sit neatly arranged on the plate, along with a generous helping of butter and honey. I sit and pour myself a cup of tea, adding more sugar than necessary, then lift the cup to my lips and sip it gingerly.

Despite the appeal of the smell of bacon, I once again find myself unable to eat.

As I stare into my tea and relive my last few moments on the *Deliverance*, the footman makes quick work of tidying my bed and selecting clothes for me to wear. I glance up in time to see him making the grievous error of choosing a matching rather than a coordinating waistcoat. I finish my tea and move to stand. "The red one," I say, pointing. This I can focus on. I need a distraction, or I will break down in tears in front of this poor servant and humiliate us both.

He jumps, clearly startled that I am addressing him as he works. He turns to me, holding a gold waistcoat in his hands. "Pardon, my lord?"

"I cannot abide monotone ensembles," I explain, taking the waistcoat from him. "If I am to wear a gold jacket and breeches, I would prefer a red or blue waistcoat. Red is absolutely delicious with gold."

He stares at me, and I frown back at him. "Singular colors are sad and boring," I say by way of elucidation.

Bless this young man—he blinks at me, and I see the moment he loses control, his mouth twitching before he smiles. He's holding in a laugh, but that's fine. He can laugh all he likes; it doesn't make what I've said any less true.

“Of course,” he says, allowing a chuckle as he takes back the gold waistcoat and returns it to the armoire. “Red it is.”

He pulls out a red waistcoat with gold trimmings. The gold is a darker shade than the silk of the jacket and breeches, and I smile widely to show that I’m pleased with the choice. “Perfect.”

“Shall I help you dress?”

“Yes,” I say, untying the robe as I approach the bed, where he has laid out the rest of my clothes for the day. “Will my father be in to see me soon?”

He hesitates, then steps up beside me to delicately lay the waistcoat out on the bed, before reaching for the white shirt he has selected for me to wear. “I . . . believe so, my lord.”

What is with everyone giving me these halting half answers when it comes to my father? I turn to face the footman just as he is about to help me into my breeches. He freezes before we become a little too familiar with each other, then stands back upright to study me.

“Is something going on?” I ask. “No one will give me a straight answer about my father. Why am I locked in the prince’s old apartments?”

“I’m just a footman, sir,” he says, sounding almost pitiful enough to placate me.

“You know something.”

He sighs. “I know that your father will be in shortly to speak with you,” he says. “Which is why I would like to get you into a pair of breeches, so you aren’t forced to have an audience with him bare-assed.”

We stare at each other for a long moment, both of us realizing in the same instant that he has grossly overstepped. My mouth twitches, and I *almost* smile despite myself.

“Fine, very well,” I say. “You make a compelling argument.”

I allow him to dress me and powder my throat and underarms with something that smells of orange and roses. He is meticulous as he does up each button and lace, and though his fingers move with the swift skill of

long practice, he still checks his work. Finally, he takes a beautiful bit of Bordeaux silk and wraps it three times around my throat before tying it into a perfect looped knot.

I rather like this footman. Something about him reminds me of the family I lost at sea. The thought makes the breath in my lungs catch, and for a moment I feel as if I might suffocate. I dare not lose my senses in front of him—I couldn't bear the humiliation on top of my grief. I force myself to exhale and tilt my head back, blinking the sting from my eyes. "What's your name?"

"Thomas, sir."

"Thomas," I repeat with a nod. "Thank you, Thomas. Excellent work. You should be a valet."

"I hope to be very soon, sir," he says.

"Is that so?" I ask. "Have you an employer in mind?"

"The king may see fit to place me within his household," he says.

"Pity," I say. "You're utterly wasted on Henry. He's dull as dishwater when he dresses."

His eyes widen, and I can see that he wants to laugh, but also that he doesn't dare laugh at the king, even in just my presence. I pat him on the shoulder. "I hope I'll see you again."

"I believe you will, my lord," Thomas says with a smile that's just a little too polite. He bows and turns to take my tray from the table, before leaving me alone with my grief and the lingering scent of bacon.

Two hours later I am tired and thoroughly annoyed from sitting up straight to keep my clothes from becoming creased. If I'm going to be dressed down by my father, I want at least to look my best—which is difficult, as I am certain my eyes are rimmed with red from my failed attempts at keeping the tears at bay.

I must find out what's happened to the crew of the *Deliverance*, or I'll continue to have nightmares about Captain Sharpe's feet dangling over the execution dock. When the door to the drawing room finally opens, I jump up, fully prepared to take up all the space in the room and demand answers *before* he has a chance to start in on my inevitable tongue-lashing.

But it isn't my father who walks into the room. Instead Henry himself darkens the doorway, wearing his father's crown and followed by a small entourage of servants.

He is breathless and a little wild eyed, which alarms me. I collect myself and bow at the waist immediately. "Your Royal Highness," I say in greeting, glancing up at him through my lashes for a cue.

He waves a hand to the men behind him. "Leave us; I would speak to him alone," he says. And then he stops one man to add: "Bring some wine."

I offer a nervous laugh as I slowly straighten my body. "Wine? It's barely half past ten, Your—"

"You're going to want it," he says to me, and I shut up, because who am I to disagree with the king? Though the pit of my belly turns to ice as the servant returns with a decanter, I take the glass and stare into the red liquid as he pours it, sinking into the settee across from the king.

He wears no wig today, his dark, wavy hair combed back as if he's run his fingers through it one too many times over the course of the morning. He has new creases in his face, around his eyes and mouth. It started to snow not twenty minutes before Henry's arrival, and I am grateful for a reason to stare out the window instead of at him.

"It's beautiful," he says.

I jump and slide my gaze his way. "Yes," I agree. "I've always been fond of the snow."

He smiles as he sips his wine. "I remember watching you play in the gardens here at Kensington when you were just a lad," he says, that strange fondness in his voice, just like the last time I spoke to him.

There was frost on the leaves then as well. At least now we are warm. “I built a snowman by the queen’s roses,” I reply.

For a moment I think we are imagining the same afternoon. I wonder what it looks like from his point of view. I vividly remember admiring him as he taught me how to roll the snow to create the body.

“Forgive me . . . ,” I finally say. “I have so many questions. What happened to the crew of the *Deliverance*? Where is the man who turned me in? And when is my father going to be here?”

“Are you that eager to see him?” Henry asks, ignoring my first two questions as he offers me a knowing smile over his wineglass.

“Well, no,” I say frankly, because what would be the point of lying now? “But I’d rather like to get it over with.”

“What do you think is going to happen, Christopher-Henry?”

I frown and set my glass down. No one has called me that since the night I ran away from home. I’ve almost forgotten it was my name. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

I am about to ask again about the crew when Henry sighs and sets his glass down. “I think it’s time you know the truth.”

My stomach clenches.

“It’s something I never intended to tell you. But the time has come when I can no longer deny what I know to be true. I owe it to my realm and to my people.”

I blink at him and pick up my own glass, because I’m starting to think he was right about needing wine to get through this conversation. I don’t say a word, and instead bring the glass to my lips and drink deeply.

What I wouldn’t give for Captain Sharpe’s port right about now. Or his arms around me . . .

“Christopher-Henry,” the king says, his voice oddly stern.

I take a second longer than I should to lower the glass, lick my lips, and set it down again. “Did something happen to my father?” I ask, and I cannot account for the strain in my voice or the tightness in my chest at the

thought. My father, for all intents and purposes, despises me. And yet, after losing the crew, the thought of losing him and being truly and utterly alone in the world is too much to bear.

“No, Christopher-Henry. The Viscount of Falmouth is fine. He’s on his way here now, with his wife and their two children.”

I finally force myself to look at Henry. What does he mean by speaking of my family as if they are strangers to me? I swallow hard, trying desperately to work out where this conversation is going, while at the same time knowing deep down exactly what he’s going to say.

I don’t want to hear it.

“Elizabeth’s new baby?”

“A girl,” Henry says.

I can’t quite decipher how I feel about that. On one hand, it means I am still the heir to Falmouth. On the other, it means I am still stuck being the heir to Falmouth. “I see.”

“Christopher-Henry . . . I told you once before that I remember your mother,” he says, and reaches into the pocket of his waistcoat to pull out a small, round object wrapped in a faded scrap of blue and silver silk. I stare at the design on it, the familiar lattice of small peaks, like rounded honeycomb in a pointed teardrop shape. It’s so reminiscent of the bolts of silk from the marketplace at Nassau that for a moment I forget how to breathe.

“That was hers?” I ask without thinking.

He’s a little startled, but then he looks down at the silk and nods. “Ah . . . yes, this was hers,” he says. He leans forward and holds the small parcel out to me. “I’ve held on to it all these years.”

I reach for the parcel and am more than a little horrified when King Henry wraps his hands around mine after placing the silk bundle into my palm. He squeezes my hand gently, then releases me.

I sit back as if burned, breathless and shaken by the brief moment of contact. I am not used to being touched so purposefully by someone who

isn’t trying to bed me or dress me. I swallow hard and stare down at the parcel in my hands. The silk is soft and worn, and somehow, as I stare down at it, tiny dots of moisture appear on its surface, darkening the blue to indigo. I sniff and blink a few times, then finally reach up to wipe the tears from my cheeks.

“She was a rare beauty,” Henry says as he watches me slowly unwrap the small bundle. “I’ve never seen her match.”

Inside the scrap of silk is a tarnished brass oval with a black velvet backing. I brush my trembling fingers over the velvet as I draw in a shaky breath. The small, round frame in my hands is no bigger than my palm, and the edges of the brass are worn down to an almost silvery shine, as if it had been handled constantly.

But that’s preposterous. Impossible.

I glance up at Henry, unable to stop the tears from pouring freely down my face. I’m not ready to look at it. I’m not ready to see her face.

Mercifully, he says nothing. He just watches me and waits.

My gaze drops back to the portrait in miniature that lies in my lap. I force myself to flip the small frame over, and there she is.

A sob escapes me as I stare into her face—*my* face. For I can see now that Henry was right when he said I resembled her. Her eyes are green like mine, but the drab olive color is enchanting under her long lashes, lined in black just like the man with the unusual pipe. Her hair is a tumble of beautiful curls that fall around her shoulders. Never before have I seen a woman in portrait with her hair down. It feels like a violation to see her like this, but I am grateful all the same.

She wears no jewelry, save for pearl drop earrings, and her dress is a simple white frock that might have shown her shoulders if her hair had not been there to hide them. She has high cheekbones, and the curve of her nose is identical to mine. Her cheeks are flushed in a way that appears not to be rouge, but the natural color of youth and life. Her mouth is drawn and relaxed, but something in her eyes stares back at me with pure, unadulterated melancholy.

I have lost all control of my emotions now. I am glad my father isn't here. I can do nothing to stop the way my breathing hitches and shakes as I sob into my hands.

Some part of me hates King Henry for seeing me this vulnerable. No one but Captain Sharpe and Tristan have ever seen me weep like this—and even then it was *nothing* like this at all.

Why does he have this? My entire life I thought no portrait of my mother existed. I never once allowed myself to hope I might gaze upon her face. She's so beautiful, it hurts to look at her. I turn the portrait back over and wrap it in the small scrap of silk, though my hands are trembling as I do.

When I finally feel able, I lift my gaze to King Henry. He's watching me with a grim expression on his face. But he nods and does not chastise me. "Keep it," he says. "It's yours."

I can't thank him. I can't bring myself to speak, so I merely nod and clutch the miniature to my chest, swallowing around the heart-sized lump in my throat. I can't help but wonder if he would have shown me this sooner had my father not moved us away from court.

Then I wonder if this *is* the reason he moved us away from court.

"Her name was Yumna, daughter of Devran," Henry says in the lazy lilt of one telling a bedtime story to a child. "He was a coffee merchant from the Ottoman Empire. My father invited him to court one day to teach the courtiers how to drink coffee. He had both of his daughters with him, as his wife had long since passed and there was no one to care for them at home. His youngest daughter was not yet ten, but his eldest was fifteen, and she was the most beautiful creature I had ever seen."

As he speaks, I am able to steady my breathing somewhat, though my breaths are still coming in little hiccups here and there. I no longer feel like I may pass out, but now my mind is reeling.

"The moment I saw her, I knew I had to have her," he continues. "I wooed her. I sent her jewels and chocolates. She was shy. Their women are not allowed to look a man in the face unless they are married, you know."

I *didn't* know . . . nor do I think that is true. I saw my fair share of Muslim women at ports, and they were standoffish but not unfriendly. I bought a flower from one such woman, who smiled at me and bowed her head but never once refused to meet my eye.

"I fell in love with her," Henry is saying when I come back to his story. "And eventually she with me. In a moment of passion you were conceived."

Everything inside me goes still. I stare at King Henry as the room around me fades into blackness. Nothing exists but he and I and the distant crackle of a fire I can no longer see, which does nothing to warm the chill in my veins.

"I . . . ?" I whisper.

He doesn't answer me but continues with his story. "I was married, of course . . . and she would have been ruined had anyone found out. I wrote to your father, my dearest friend. I begged him to marry her and raise the child as his own."

Another punch to my gut. "No," I breathe, rising shakily to my feet.

Henry is on his feet as well, and before I can get away from him, his arms are around me. He clutches me to him, and my skin crawls, but I can't bring myself to move. "You are my son, Christopher-Henry," he whispers into my hair. Whatever semblance of control over my emotions I managed to achieve is lost entirely as my knees buckle, and I sink down into his embrace.

Every moment my father shied away from my touch and called for the governess to whisk me away plays back in my mind. Every moment he looked at me with contempt in his eyes. Never once did he feel love for me, and finally I understand why.

"You're all right," Henry says, and as I scramble to collect myself, I realize he's been saying it over and over again. One last sob escapes me before I suck in a shuddering breath and push at his chest. I need air. I need space.

He releases me and I fall back a step, then whirl around and stumble over to the fireplace. I lean against the mantel, gripping the solid wood as I hunch over and suck in the hot air from the fire. It tastes of soot and bile, and the effect is immediate: I swallow hard and give a cough, but I manage to keep the now-soured wine in my stomach.

"I need—"

"I'll leave you be for now," Henry—no, my *father* says from behind me. "I'll return when you've had some time to collect yourself."

How can I *possibly* collect myself? I've lost everything, all at once. I've lost Captain Sharpe and the twins. Billy and Mr. Tydes and Rodriguez and the whole crew. Now my father and my stepmother, and even Victoria—whom I admit I never much liked, but I *had* always considered her blood. He's taken *all* of them from me.

And at the same time, he has given me this immeasurable gift: my mother's face . . . and *him*. My father. My *real* father, who pulled me into his arms without hesitation to comfort me in a moment of need.

That has to mean something, doesn't it?

I listen to the sound of his heels retreating, but I don't dare break my gaze away from the fire until I hear the click of the drawing room door closing behind him. He never answered my questions about my crew—about Captain Sharpe. A new wave of grief washes over me.

But even in my current state, I note that for the first time since I arrived here, the door to the apartments is left unlocked.

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I don’t know how Henry imagines I can simply act as if my entire life up till just last week hasn’t been a lie, but he does. I can’t yet bring myself to call him Father. I’m not even sure he wants me to—but at least the children of kings are still expected to use their formal titles in public spaces, so I am safe from any awkwardness for now.

The realization that everyone around me knew the truth before I did comes in the days that follow. Even Renard knew. He knew my deepest secret before I did, and he used it against me. Against my *crew*. The utter violation of it makes my innards twist into nauseating knots. I hate him more with every passing day. And I miss my crew, and my dear captain. Every time I think of it, my heart starts racing and I fear I will be sick.

At least one good thing has come of it: Thomas is officially my valet, and I do like him a great deal. Something about him feels like home—the same way the twins felt like home. There is a comradery between us that is at once painful and beautiful.

Even now he is setting my nerves at ease simply by annoying me as he expertly plaits my hair back. “Are you certain you won’t wear a wig, Your Grace?”

“I’m not sure you’re supposed to call me that,” I point out. “I’m not a prince. Or a duke.”

“But you are His Royal Highness’s son.”

“Not officially,” I remind Thomas. “And yes, I’m sure I won’t wear a wig. I don’t have a title or a place in the House, so I don’t have to wear a stuffy wig.” Thomas gives an exasperated sigh, and I smile. “I’ll let you rouge my cheeks if that will placate you.”

Thomas laughs at that and steps around me after tying a ribbon into the bottom of my plait. “I’m not going to rouge your cheeks, my lord. You already look like a rake without a wig, simply because you *are* one. Rouging your cheeks would only heighten the effect.”

This startles a laugh out of me. The only time I feel normal is when Thomas is around to bicker with me. I like that he is comfortable enough to do so, because I *need* that. It feels familiar, and safe, and so long as I am doing verbal battle with Thomas over meaningless things like my choice of clothes or hairstyle, I’m not thinking about how my life is in shambles or how my recklessness likely got the crew of the *Deliverance* killed.

The only true family I have ever known, and their blood is on my hands. The Viscount of Falmouth was right about one thing—I *am* cursed.

It has been days with no news, despite my asking every day. I truly fear the worst—that if they *did* survive, each day that passes is another they could be hanged at the executioner’s dock. While I sit here, being dressed for a goddamned *ball*.

The ball tonight will be held in the Orangery, a pavilion built in the gardens next to the palace. I let Thomas pull me to my feet so he can smooth out my silk jacket. He has selected indigo for me to wear, which is a bold choice. I’m sure I’ll get a few looks for it—but I imagine he wouldn’t have chosen a royal color for me to parade about in without the king’s suggesting it.

I stare at the shape of myself in the mirror as he checks me over for any flaws. I almost look the part of a prince tonight—a bastard prince, but a prince nonetheless. I wonder what the Christopher-Henry of nine months

ago might have thought of this revelation. I think I would have relished the news, had it come before my great escape into the world—before I learned what familial love feels like.

I suck in a breath and blink my eyes to keep the tears from rolling down my cheeks. I let Thomas and the room around me fade away as I stare into my mother's face gazing back at me in the mirror. I wonder if Tristan fell to his death from the rigging, like in my nightmares, or if he was arrested and hanged like the rest of them.

Would they have been merciful to him, if they realized what he hid under his clothes? Would that even be merciful, to allow him to live while the rest were hanged? And what about Billy and Naeem? What about Jacoby and all the other men I didn't have time to get to know firsthand? Were they sold like cattle and sent back to the colonies?

The very thought makes me sick.

I turn, startling Thomas with my sudden movement. I don't stop to apologize, though—I push past him and grab the pitcher of clean water from the washbasin. But before I can pour some out, Thomas snatches the pitcher away.

"Oh, no you don't!" he says, setting it down and ushering me away from the basin. "I won't have you getting these silks wet with another of your fits. Have some tea."

"I don't want tea."

"Then have some wine."

I glance to the decanter full of wine on the small tray Thomas smuggled in for me after walking into my room following Henry's confession and finding me crying on the floor. I nod and pour a small glass from the decanter. It's a robust, sweet red wine with a hint of oak and cloves. I sip at the glass until my nerves are calmed, then finish off the rest in one gulp.

"I'm ready," I say with a sigh.

"Are you?"

I give a humorless laugh and turn to face Thomas. “Am I?” I ask ruefully, holding my arms out for inspection.

He smiles. “You look ready to cause a scandal tonight.”

At that, my smile turns genuine. “Perfect.”

Though it is thrown in honor of Saint Nicholas Day, the ball is clearly an excuse for King Henry to show me off like I’m a shiny new jewel gifted by a foreign sovereign. I am formally announced on my own merit as “the Honorable Christopher-Henry Mortimer Davenport.” Notably, my father’s viscountcy is not mentioned.

My ex-father . . . ?

I step into the Orangery in my indigo suit, with a gold silk cape draped across one shoulder, clasped with a chain of rubies that would sink me were I to jump into deep waters. Christopher-Henry might have marveled at his reflection in it. He might have felt powerful. He might have felt dashing. Instead I feel the weight my shame in this cape. Not only because my initial reaction was to marvel at it as it was presented it for my approval, but because this display of wealth and finery is, in itself, deeply shameful. I did nothing to earn these jewels—and neither did Henry. We were merely born to them, by sheer happenstance.

King Henry sits atop the throne in his wig and crown, Queen Eleanor on his right in a gold silk gown and a crown of holly and rubies. Both are swathed in ermine fur. Neither of them earned that, either.

I kneel before the king first, and as he stretches out his hand, I rise and approach the dais to kiss the ruby ring on his finger. I stand and turn to Eleanor, then bow to her as deeply as I bowed to her husband. “Your Majesties,” I say in greeting. “Happy Christmas.”

Henry, for what it’s worth, smiles dotingly at me. Eleanor is unimpressed, which shouldn’t come as a surprise if she’s newly discovered

the same truth as I, but I feel a pang of loss for the love she once had for me nevertheless.

I want to ask once more about the fate of my crew, but I am quickly crowded by another dignitary waiting to be announced to the throne. For a moment I say nothing. I watch as he bows and makes his introduction, and then, all at once, I can no longer stand aside. I step forward and look at Henry. “Your Majesty, I beseech a moment of your time.”

Eleanor’s gaze jerks to my face with a mix of horror and fury, but she schools her features well and turns to Henry, who is smiling as calmly as ever. “We will speak later.”

“But—”

“You would disobey your king?” Eleanor demands.

More than a few heads rise to glance my way, and my face is instantly aflame with humiliation. I clench my teeth and shake my head, bowing deeply to them both. “Forgive me, Your Majesties. Later is fine.” Swallowing down my grief and shame, I duck away into the crowd.

I find champagne first and Kitty second. She kisses my cheeks and takes my arm as she leads me over to Francis. Thank Christ for Katherine Stuart. I brace myself against her strength, her sweetness, and take a moment to calm my battering pulse before fixing on my social smile.

“Francis, you remember Kit.”

“Christopher-Henry,” he corrects her, a small reminder to be less familiar with me. I don’t blame him; if I were him, I too would feel threatened by me. Especially as I am now, with his wife on my arm.

I bow my head, but I am not sure how deep I am meant to bow to him. He outranks me as a marquess, but only if I am still a viscount. Henry hasn’t told me where I stand. “A pleasure, Marquess.”

“God, please don’t,” he mumbles. “Francis is perfectly fine.”

Well, he’s not a humorless ass after all. I’m relieved to have found him and Kitty so I needn’t socialize without them at my side. We move around the Orangery together, and I do my best to engage in polite conversation. I

have always hated small talk with the peerage, but now it is agonizing torture. Every shallow compliment I receive makes me grit my teeth and sets my pulse racing. Kitty saves me more than once from saying something unsuitable.

"God," I mutter when we are finally alone with fresh glasses of champagne. "Would this have been our life if we'd married?"

"You've always been quite good at it," Kitty reminds me.

"That was then," I mutter.

"Are you so different now?"

I don't know how to answer that. Yes! Yes, of course I am. And no, I suppose I'm not.

At that moment I see *him*. Despite everything I have been through, despite everything I have learned, despite the nine-month chasm that lies between us, the sight of my once father, the Viscount of Falmouth, still strikes fear and inadequacy into my heart the instant our gazes meet.

If I could run, I would—but somehow Kitty and I thought it was a brilliant idea to trap ourselves in this corner of the Orangery.

"Damnation," I whisper.

"There are ladies present," Francis scolds me with a gasp.

I'm not sure if he is having a laugh or if he's really just an absolute boob. I don't look at him to find out; I can't take my eyes from *him* as he makes his way toward me with Elizabeth in tow. At least they haven't got the children with them; that would be far more than I could handle.

"Christopher-Henry," he says stiffly, once he's near enough to speak without yelling.

What do I say? What do I *call* him? Does he know that I know? Does Elizabeth know? I stare at her, and she gazes back at me with watery eyes, looking like she might burst into tears at any moment. Dear God, I hope she doesn't cry.

"Sir," I settle on with a nod.

He sneers, and I know in that moment that he knows *I* know.

Before he can get a word in, I speak again. “I hear congratulations are in order on the birth of your second daughter.”

He takes the comment like a slap to the face—as though he would throttle me if it wouldn’t dirty his hands to touch me.

What an absurd reaction. What a small man. Were I the sort who wanted children, I would be just as happy with a girl or a boy.

“Oh, Christopher-Henry,” Elizabeth whimpers, and I take a small step back.

“Elizabeth,” I say carefully. “You look well.”

“*Viscountess*,” my former father hisses at me.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I won’t have you calling my wife by her Christian name,” he snaps.

Ah. I see how it is now. I finish my champagne and set the glass on a passing servant’s tray with a silent nod of thanks. “Don’t worry, *Father*,” I say. “I have no interest in stealing your child-bride from you. You needn’t worry about my being too familiar.”

“How dare you,” he growls.

“Easily,” I reply evenly. “I would stay and chat, but I think I’d rather be drawn and quartered.” I turn to Kitty and take her hand, pressing a chaste kiss to her knuckles. “Good night, Katherine. Francis.” I look at Elizabeth. “Elizabeth.”

She dabs at her eyes and nods, and I bow to them. Then, without another glance at the Viscount of Falmouth, I stride away from the small group. Before I make it to the doors, I see a familiar face, one I would much rather avoid. I turn away before Digby Hale and his father can lay eyes on me, and make for the French doors that lead out into the frosty, snow-covered gardens.

I step outside—and instantly my breath clouds around my head like the smoke from the Turkish man’s pipe. I trudge out of the way of the windows, shivering, and wrap my arms around myself to keep from freezing in the cold.

“Well, this was a great idea,” I say to no one.

“A bit cold for a walk in the garden,” no one says in reply.

Christ!

I spin around, a hand to my chest, and lock eyes with an exceptionally pretty young man: big brown eyes, beautiful lips, and a silly white wig on his head.

“Indeed,” I say, a bit breathless from my scare. “But far more adventurous.”

“Fan of adventure, are you?” he asks as he approaches me.

He has no idea. “Apparently so,” I murmur.

He chuckles, though he doesn’t understand what I’m really talking about. “My name is William,” he says. As simple as that, not a title in sight—though he clearly has one, from the quality of his wig.

Once upon a time, I would have drowned my sorrows with his mouth. And some part of me still wants to be *that* Kit, wants to be free of my aching heart and grief for all that was ripped from me. I don a grin and straighten my back. “Christopher-Henry,” I say, because somehow asking him to call me Kit feels like a betrayal to Captain Sharpe.

“A pleasure to meet you, Christopher-Henry,” he says as he takes yet another step closer.

“I’m sure it is,” I say coyly, and am rewarded with another chuckle. I both love and hate the small thrill I feel at the sound of flirtatious laughter. “Shall we take a walk, then?” I ask, motioning to the gardens. “There’s a fine pile of snow over there, by that other pile of snow.”

“Is there?” he asks, more laughter in his voice. “I’d love to see it.”

And then we are walking through the frozen gardens in search of a door into the private apartments of the palace, as my desperate need for oblivion does battle with my all-too-recently-broken heart.

Admittedly, I have no idea where I am going. I haven't explored the halls of Kensington Palace without a guide since my childhood, and at that time it was at least thrice the size and the rooms had a tendency to move around.

I don't know how to get back to my apartments from this garden, though I know there must be some convoluted path there. We make our way back into Kensington Palace through a side door, entering into the conservatory. At first the footman at the door looks alarmed—but then he recognizes me and bows without a word. I give him a grateful nod as we pass, and he closes the door behind us. We leave behind a trail of snow and dirt, but I can't bring myself to care.

I lead William through to a drawing room, and though it is empty, I decide not to risk a dalliance here, lest someone walk in. We slip into the staircase behind the drawing room instead, and before we make it around the bend of the landing, his hands are on my waist.

I turn and let him crowd me against the wall. His mouth covers mine, and I wrap my arms around his neck as he crushes his body to me. We are similarly built, but the way he's grinding his hips against mine is causing the wainscotting behind me to dig into my back. It's not entirely pleasant, but I try to ignore it.

I *need* this. I do. I try to shift my weight as we kiss—frantic, short-lived kisses with too much tongue and teeth, but still *good*. William is a far more appealing paramour than Digby Hale ever was—though he is nothing compared with my captain.

And just like that, my heart is no longer in it.

I push him back, perhaps a bit too roughly. Before I can explain myself, my cuff catches the queue of his wig and sends it careening to the floor. He gasps and twists away from me to try to catch it, but in doing so, he stumbles back a step and we both go toppling into the railing.

One of us kicks the wig—I'm not sure who—and it vaults into the air to escape down the stairs, then lands at the bottom with an inelegant flop.

We both stare at it, his arms still around my waist, our lips flushed and swollen. He begins to tremble against me, and I almost don't want to look at

him. Is he furious? Have I humiliated him?

Finally I face him and see that he is shaking with barely contained laughter. I let out a breath and a single soft chuckle of my own, and that's all it takes to break him.

William bursts into laughter, one arm rising to drape across his eyes. He has a lovely, albeit messy, head of dark golden hair. I wonder why he chose to cover it up in the first place.

I let him go, and he slides to the floor. I sink down in front of him, one leg dangling off the steps as I laugh with him—my first genuine bout of laughter since I was on board the *Deliverance*.

But even that feels like a betrayal. As my laughter turns sour on my tongue, I understand that I'm not ready to be unfaithful to Captain Sharpe yet, no matter how lonely I may be.

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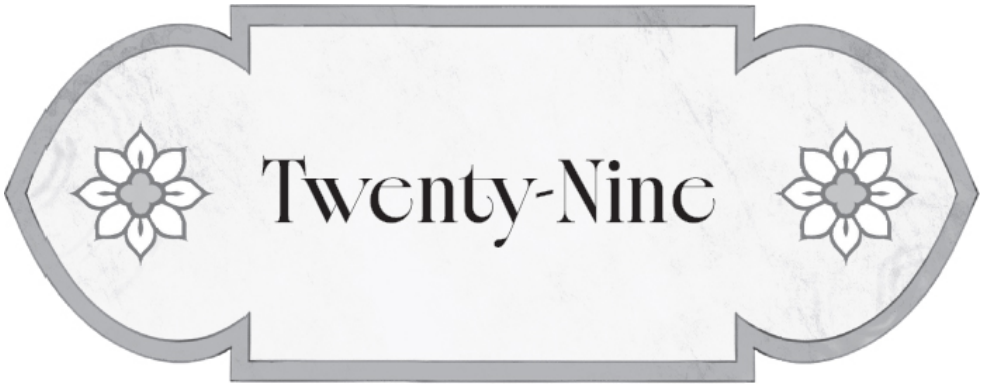

“It’s settled, then,” King Henry says as he paces back and forth in my bedroom. The fire is burning, leaving the whole room warm and cozy despite its size and grandeur.

A few days have passed since the Saint Nicholas Day ball and the excruciating interaction with my ex-father and ex-family. I hear they are still at court, but mercifully, I have not run into them since.

It likely helps that I don’t leave my rooms much.

“Sorry,” I say, turning to face him. “What’s settled?”

“Your Grace,” Thomas grumbles, “I can’t shave a moving target.”

I turn toward Thomas and offer a small, sheepish smile. He simply narrows his eyes, so I tip my head back and let him continue sliding the flat blade along my jaw.

“Your legitimacy,” King Henry says, exasperated.

“My . . . ?”

“Have you been listening to me at all, Christopher-Henry?” my father grumbles as he steps over to me. “I’ve been talking about it for the past hour.”

I don’t remind him that we’ve been in my rooms for only the better part of twenty minutes. I dare not move my jaw at all as the blade slides along my skin. But when Thomas stops to wipe the blade on a leather strap, I shift my gaze to my father’s face. “No, sorry.”

He stares at me for a long moment before barking out a laugh. He’s annoyed, I can tell—but he’s also too good-natured to remain so. “I am going to legitimize you in the eyes of the law in a christening ceremony on Christmas Day.”

Before Thomas can lean back in with the blade, I sit up fully and stare at Henry. “You’re going to *what*?”

“You are my son, Christopher-Henry. I have no heir but you.”

“You want *me* to be the heir apparent?” I ask. “*Me?* A common bastard with a criminal record?”

Henry huffs and pushes me back into the chair for Thomas. “Running away from home isn’t a crime.”

“I—”

“Your Grace,” Thomas insists.

I shut up.

“You will be crowned Prince of England before the court. I won’t delay any longer. The queen no longer bleeds, and I won’t have my father’s throne usurped by some Hanoverian pretender because I failed to provide a legitimate heir.”

I stare up at the ornate ceiling of my bedroom as panic rises in my chest. I can’t be the crown prince! I wasn’t raised for it! I barely speak any Latin, I have no decision-making skills at all, and after my last appearance at court I’m certain I would rather be keelhauled than engage in polite conversation with another spineless nobleman.

As a towel slides across my skin, I move to sit up once more. “Your Majesty—”

“You can call me Father in private, Christopher-Henry.”

“Your Majesty.”

He levels a look at me, and I level one right back. I'm not ready to make that leap yet.

He squints but doesn't challenge me. Every day I see myself more and more in his features. It scares the living shite out of me, if I am being perfectly honest. But . . . it's also a strange sort of comfort. I could almost pretend I haven't lost everything in the gaining of this one thing.

"I don't even know how to *be* a prince."

"It's quite simple, really," Henry says as he sits on my sofa and reaches for his cup of tea. "You look charming, you kiss babies . . . you lay your hands on the poor and have discreet affairs with wealthy married women."

The old Christopher-Henry would have absolutely loved that. I shift my gaze to Thomas, who is being very careful about his facial expression as he cleans up from shaving my jaw. I reach up to touch my cheek and slide my fingers along the silky texture of my skin.

"Well done, Thomas," I say as I rise to join my father in front of the fire.

Thomas cracks a smile. "Thank you, Your Grace."

"Much better," Henry says as he studies me. "You were beginning to look a little too rakish."

"That *is* the effect I was going for," I note as I lift my own tea. It's an unusual blend, with bits of flower petals floating in it. Henry has a great love for the teas of the Orient, and this is one I have never tried before. "Speaking of . . . It's been weeks. Please, Your Majesty, can you not finally tell me the fate of my crew? I think I've been patient long enough. Surely, you must know what's become of them."

Henry sips his tea and gives a low sigh. "I have no intention of dying anytime soon, Christopher-Henry." Again he has ignored my question, and I feel a familiar frustration rising in me. "There is plenty of time for you to be prepared for the throne. But I will have you legitimized, and what better day to do it than Christmas?"

I can think of about 364 days better than the celebration of the birth of Christ for my rechristening, but I don't say so. Instead I watch Henry as he

sips at his tea with a content expression on his face, and my frustration falters as an unfamiliar warmth swells in my chest. In these quiet moments, when he seems to truly love me as a son, my grief begins to feel a little lighter. The nightmares begin to feel a little farther away.

I could do this. I could have a real family—a family by blood.

I could be the man he wants me to be, if I try.

"All right, Father," I say at last, and I am startled by how much the smile on his face when I call him Father makes my heart ache. He wants Christopher-Henry, not Mr. Kit. And for the first time I wonder if I should let the *Deliverance* go. Without them, I am the only one holding on to a person I can no longer be.

Henry sets his tea down and rises to his feet. I rise too, because I'm fairly certain I am supposed to stand when he does. Before I can wonder what I should do next, his arms are around me. He hugs me to his chest, pressing his cheek to the top of my head.

"Excellent," he says into my hair. "I know you'll make me proud."

I stiffen, and there is a moment when I want to pull away from him and run from the room. But I take a slow breath and push that feeling away, allowing myself to just be held by my father. My true father.

Somewhere deep inside me, the Christopher-Henry that I used to be is weeping tears of joy.

Fine. I hate to admit it, I truly do . . . but I *am* rather dashing in this white wig.

I turn my head to the side as I study my reflection in the ornate mirror of my bedchamber. I don't recognize myself, but I don't hate what's staring back at me. I could do this. I could be the Prince of England—I could be someone's beloved son. Even if it leaves the taste of bile and metal in the back of my throat.

“You may be the most conceited man I’ve ever met,” Thomas says from across the room.

“*May* be?” I ask. I don’t fling off the wig and tell him it’s all an act, tell him that I cry myself to sleep every night thinking about the men I grew to love as family. About the man I . . .

No, I dare not put it into words.

“I’ve met a few who may rival your confidence.” He’s sitting on the sofa, mending a button on one of Henry’s waistcoats from his youth.

“Have you? I suppose I’ll have to try harder.”

“You don’t have to try at all.”

I smile and make my way over to him to check his progress. For now I am wearing only my white stockings, lavender breeches, and a white shirt as I wait for him to finish his repairs.

“You do quality work, Thomas,” I say as I admire the purple lace. “If I don’t tell you enough, please know that I am well aware how lucky I am to have you.”

“Are you buttering me up?” he asks.

“Of course.”

“I won’t sneak any young women into your bedroom.”

“I’ll continue to hold out hope anyway.”

He scoffs and snaps the thread he’s just tied off, before moving to stand. “Come, let’s finish dressing you so you can ruin some poor young lady’s life.”

“I’ll undress myself for bed tonight,” I tell him as he ties my cravat with expert fingers. “It’s going to be a late night, and you deserve to sleep.”

“Now I *know* you’re buttering me up,” Thomas says, but he smiles anyway. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Once I am dressed and Thomas has given his nod of approval, I am ushered from my apartments down to the formal dining hall, where our guests are already arriving.

The dining hall is beautiful. Countless tapers and sconces twinkle across the huge expanse of the table. The silver gleams in the candlelight, and the smell of roasted meat, sweet squash, and hot butter gives the room an overall effect of obscene wealth. Some small part of me misses the young man who might have delighted in the opulence of it all, but I'll never be that young man again.

Still, something about it is warm and inviting at the same time. It's nothing like the dinners at my fath—at the viscount's house in Falmouth. And there is no tablecloth to hide the carefully carved and patterned wood of the dining table, just a runner of silk and lace that follows the entire length and drapes elegantly off either end.

"His Grace, Christopher-Henry Mortimer Stuart, Prince of Wales and Heir Apparent."

Oh *no*.

I freeze when I hear myself announced, then turn to stare at the steward with wide eyes. Abject horror sends my heart shooting up into my throat, and I must force myself to swallow it back down before I remember to breathe.

What on God's green earth is going on?

I let my gaze cross the room, passing over face after face, all of which reflect back to me the same expression of shock and dismay at my announcement. When I finally find the king at the other end of the dining hall, he's looking smug and proud, and far too pleased with himself.

I don't know what to do, so I just stand there, stunned and staring, until the dead silence around me slowly shifts to a cacophony of whispers, and then to a soft roar of voices all clamoring to be heard.

I could kill him.

I could *actually* kill him.

Christmas is still two weeks away, and I thought I had time to prepare myself for the inevitable scandal of the king's secret bastard son being raised to the status of blood prince.

But apparently not.

When the floor finally releases my feet, I cross the room in a daze to where my father stands, soaking up the chaos around him.

“Are you *mad*?” I whisper when I am close enough that I know no one else can hear but Eleanor, who stands beside him with an expression that says she’d like to ask the very same question.

“I told you my plan.”

“You said *Christmas*,” I snap.

“Christmas will be your christening. Tonight is your coming out.”

“You *are* mad!”

Henry smiles and touches my cheek—and as much as I want to stay furious at him, when he draws me in and kisses my temple, I deflate a little and find myself leaning into the affectionate gesture.

“Enjoy the evening, Christopher-Henry,” the king says softly into my hair. “You were born for scandal . . . and I think tonight will be the first of many.”

I do my best all evening to avoid Digby Hale. Both he and his father have spent the entire night vying desperately for eye contact with me. The Viscount and Viscountess of Falmouth are also in attendance, but unlike the Hales, they have carefully *avoided* meeting my eye all night.

Shortly after midnight the festivities are still going strong, and I am sure I can sneak away without being seen, when Digby emerges from whatever shadow he was lurking in to block my path.

Damn.

“Digby,” I say stiffly.

“Your Grace,” he replies.

Wonderful. Now that that's over with, I smile and turn to step around him. He has the audacity to reach out and take my arm. "I had hoped for an audience with you," he says. "To catch up. I haven't seen you since that night on your father's balcony."

At once he realizes his error and blanches. "That is," he sputters. "I mean to say—"

"Good Lord. Let's skip over the nonsense where we feel awkward about who my father is," I plead, massaging my brow.

"You always were terrible at formality," Digby says, grinning. Apparently, he thinks that because he had his tongue down my throat once, he can be familiar with me like this.

I lift a brow to let him know that I am not of that opinion, and he shuts his mouth immediately.

"I simply wanted to . . . extend my congratulations on your elevation," he says after a pause.

I squint at him.

He seems to realize he's digging himself a deeper hole and drops the shovel. "Perhaps we could take a walk through the palace and catch up?" he asks. "Like old times."

Like old times?

The memory of the last time I took a walk with him is so vivid, I can still taste the blood on my lip.

"I'm very tired," I say curtly. "It's been a long night."

I breeze past him to slip out the door before someone else can stop me. The halls outside the dining room are blissfully empty of guests, though servants mill about, tidying up and waiting to tend to their employers. I stop to watch them for a moment, swallowing down the lump in my throat as I consider how nine months ago I would have breezed past them as if they were naught but furniture in the room. I might have gossiped while they stood mere inches from me, as if they hadn't ears or tongues of their own.

I catch the eye of a footman carrying wood through for the fireplaces. He hesitates, as if he might drop what he is doing at my behest, and I offer him an apologetic smile and shake my head. I want to say something. To thank them; to apologize to them. But I realize that all I am doing is making them uncomfortable, so I drop my gaze and continue through the hall.

I head straight for the entrance to the palace's private apartments and make the long, lonely walk back to my own rooms. I wasn't lying when I said I was tired—the amount of energy it takes to get through a night at court is immeasurable, and thanks to my father's shocking announcement before dinner even began, tonight it felt doubled.

When I finally reach the entrance to my apartments, I find the fires burning, giving the rooms the deliciously warm glow of firelight, which is more than I expected after giving Thomas the night off to sleep. The curtains are already drawn around my bed. I drop my cravat onto my vanity and slide out of my jacket before draping it over the back of one chair.

As I reach up to work open the buttons of my waistcoat, I am suddenly struck by the unnerving sensation that I am being watched. I pause and turn to look around the room, my gaze wandering from shadow to shadow as my heart does a nervous skitter in my chest.

His voice, when he does speak, comes from the shrouded darkness of my bed.

"Hello, Kitten."

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Thirty

I can't move. My body aches to run to him, but I simply can't move from where I stand, my hands still frozen on the buttons of my waistcoat.

The silence that follows lasts so long, I'm quite sure I hallucinated his voice altogether—and then my bed creaks, and I see the familiar worn leather of his boots emerge from the curtains to land almost silently on the plush fur rug that stretches under my bed.

A million different responses are born and die on my tongue as I stare across the room at the ghost of Captain Reggie Sharpe, back from the dead and *here in my bedroom*. In the end, my response to his astonishing reappearance into my life is, "You had your boots on in my bed?"

This startles a laugh out of him, and he steps toward me—but I beat him to it. His single step forward unlocks my feet from the floor, and I run across the room and throw myself into his arms with such force that he stumbles back. I hear him utter a breathless "oof" as his back collides with the solid oak post of my bed, but then his arms are around me, and I can't hold in the tears for a moment longer.

I sob into his shirt, and he holds me against him, the familiar expanse of his hands sliding up and down my back. He lets me take my time, and

though it feels like forever before my breathing evens out to match his own, I'm sure it's been only a matter of minutes. He presses a kiss to my ear, and the rasp of stubble against my chin sends hot chills sparking up my spine.

"I thought you were dead," I whisper into his shirt.

"I'm far too stubborn to die," he murmurs into my ear, and then he pushes me back just enough to get me to look up at him. He's smiling, while I'm quite sure I have snot running down my nose.

He touches my cheek, his thumb brushing away a few tears as he stares down at me. "You're all right, Kitten," he murmurs, and I believe him. I nod, because I can't answer or I'll start to cry all over again. I wrap my arms around his neck, and he draws me close once more, tipping his head down—but not quite far enough.

I have to lean up to catch his mouth, but then we are kissing, and I *know* that I will be all right, because he is *here*, and he is *alive*, and he is in my arms.

And then he breaks the kiss and lifts me up. I don't argue, even if it is a little emasculating. He sets me on my bed and lowers himself onto his knees in front of me, hands sliding down to settle on my hips.

"You look like a regular fop, Your Grace," he says as his lips twist up into an amused smirk.

My face goes hot, and I reach up to pull the wig off. "I had to wear it," I mutter, and he laughs softly as he takes the wig from my hands and drops it onto the floor beside him.

"It suits you better than you think."

"Don't say that," I whisper—because as much as I *wanted* it to suit me just a few hours ago, in this moment I want nothing more than to just be *Kit* again, making terrible decisions and waking up beside him every morning.

"Would you rather I lied to you?" he asks.

"Yes."

He laughs again and shakes his head before leaning in to rest it against my stomach. I wrap my arms around him once more and touch the familiar

blue silk ribbon tying his locs back.

“How are you alive?” I ask.

“Captain Hale was more interested in you than us,” Sharpe explains softly, letting me stroke his hair as he rests his weight in my lap. “He crippled the ship so we couldn’t follow and left with his prize.”

“Tristan?” I whisper.

He lifts his head with a confused expression. “What about him?”

“He went up into the rigging and never came down.”

Sharpe blinks up at me, and then his mouth spreads into a grin and he chuckles. “The little shit stayed up in the rigging until we were alone in the water. He’s all right, Kitten.”

I let out a trembling breath and reach up to cover my face with my hands. “I’ve thought . . . this whole time . . . I was so sure . . .”

Sharpe puts his hands over mine and pulls them down so he can see my face. “Everyone is all right. We were in Portsmouth assessing the damage to the ship when I heard the rumors about the king’s new bastard in the palace.”

“And you just assumed it was me?” I ask. What an insane scheme, to come sneaking into Kensington Palace on the off chance it might be me in these apartments.

“Is there another Christopher-Henry Davenport at court?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “It’s Stuart now,” I say.

He whistles and gets to his feet, then moves to sit beside me on the bed. “Stuart,” he says. “You’ve certainly come up in the world, haven’t you, Kitten?”

His words, which were likely only meant as a jest, strike a chord in me. It wasn’t my intention to rise so high, nor my desire . . . but now that I have it, now that I have my father and he *wants* me, I don’t know what to do.

“How did you get in here?” I deflect.

“There isn’t much a bag of coin can’t get you, Kitten. And this helped a great deal.” He pulls my father’s—no, the Viscount of Falmouth’s signet ring and places it in my palm.

I scoff and push the ring into my pocket. “But there are guards everywhere.”

“Oh, aye,” he says with a nod. “But the servants of the gentry are especially good at espionage. The richer the patron, the more devious they are.”

I see truth in what he says, and I laugh softly. “You’re insane.”

“I’ve had worse said about me.”

“You’re insane, *and* you’re daft.”

“Both are very true,” he agrees, brushing a lock of my hair behind my ear. “I’m so sorry, Kitten,” he whispers.

I gaze up at him, my heart wrenching at the tone of his voice. “For what?”

“For not coming sooner,” he says. “For letting you think we were dead. I always planned to come for you, but I had to see to my ship first. I wasn’t sure where to look until I heard the rumors, and I came as soon as I did. I’ve been in London for days, bribing the servants and trying to get in.”

I smile and bring his hand to my lips to kiss his knuckles. “I’m just glad you’re alive,” I say.

“We should go,” he says, getting to his feet and taking my hand in his. “I still need to acquire a new ship. We can catch up once we’re away from here.”

“Go?” I ask, letting him pull me up.

“What did you think?” Sharpe asks with a rueful smile. “That the king would let you keep a pirate for a paramour?”

I flush at the suggestion but pull my hand from his. “I . . . I can’t just go.”

“Why not?”

“He’s my *family*.”

He frowns at that. “Kitten . . . *we* are your family. He only wants you because he thinks you’re useful now.”

That hurts, and I don’t hide that as I stare up at him. “You’re wrong.”

“Am I?” he asks. “You think he would have come for you had he legitimate children to secure his throne? There’s talk of an uprising against the Stuarts, Kitten. He had to secure the throne *somehow*, to keep someone else from laying claim to it.”

“No,” I say, stepping away from him. “You’re wrong about him. He wants me.” Whom am I trying to convince—him or me? Henry said himself that he never intended to tell me the truth. Still, I can’t bring myself to face it. “He loves me. He loved my mother.” I pull her miniature from my waistcoat pocket and hold it out to him. “Look at her,” I say. “She was beautiful.”

He studies me, then steps forward to take the miniature from my hands. I watch as he crosses the room to study it in the firelight, and slowly his features soften. “She *was* beautiful, Kitten,” he says—but there’s an odd strain to his voice. Maybe he understands now. I have to give this a shot, don’t I? I have to try.

I slowly make my way to the fireplace, watching him. “Her father was a merchant from the Ottoman Empire. She and my father had an affair . . . I’m sure he would have married her if he hadn’t already been married to Eleanor.”

He lifts his gaze to mine, frowning. “You think a king would have taken your mother, a foreign commoner, as his wife?”

“She wasn’t . . .” I set my jaw. I hate the thought of someone calling my mother a commoner, but I know that’s the old Christopher-Henry thinking. Mr. Kit would never have thought of “commoner” as a dirty word. My face burns with shame. “Why are you doing this?”

“Kitten . . . I’m not trying to hurt you,” he says softly. “But your mother was a follower of Islam. She never would have dishonored herself or her

father by having an affair."

"You don't know that." It's a stupid thing to say. Deep down I know he's probably right.

"No?" he asks. "You think all women are so eager to fuck royalty that they would give up all their values for one night with a man?"

I shouldn't be shocked by his crass turn of phrase—but I am. It *genuinely* shocks me, and I snatch the miniature from his hands and clutch it to my chest. "What are you trying to say?"

"That men like Henry take what they want." The look in his eyes is cold, and some part of me whispers that he's speaking from experience. But a louder part of me is desperate to be loved by my father.

"Stop it," I whisper.

"You'd prefer to call your mother a whore than to even consider the possibility that your father is a—"

"Stop!" I snap. I can't listen to this anymore. I can't hear him say these things about my parents—about Henry. Not now that I have finally felt the tender touch of my father's loving kiss on my brow, after eighteen years of longing for it. "Get out."

"Kitten, you—"

"Get out, or I'll call the guard."

His face shutters when I say that, and whether or not he thinks I really will, I see that he won't argue further. He walks over to my bed to pick up his hat from where it must have been sitting on my pillows. I turn away from him to stare down at the miniature of my mother in my hands, watching the beautiful melancholy of her eyes as the firelight flickers over them.

I should stop him. I should *apologize*. Something inside me knows he is right, but my pride is hurt, and I am so desperate for my father to be the sort of man who loves his son that I say nothing.

After a short eternity I hear his footsteps fade from the room, then the scrape of the door to the servants' entrance by the fireplace, and he leaves

me to my turmoil and grief.

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Sleep eludes me, but I have no one to blame but myself.

When Thomas throws open the curtains of my bed to allow the sun its full-frontal assault on my retinas, I groan and pull the pillow over my head. “It’s too early for me to interact with you, Thomas,” I grumble, my voice muffled by the down filling.

As usual, Thomas ignores my pleas for mercy and plucks the pillow from my arms, before bringing it down on my face with just enough force that I sit up to retaliate, only for him to pull it away from me again.

“This is the second time I’ve come in here to rouse you,” he says, holding the pillow just out of reach. “It’s time for royal princes to be up and about.”

I squint at him as I recall an earlier attempt, which may have resulted in me swatting at poor Thomas’s face in my efforts to foil him. I hate him a little for waking me. After last night, I bitterly regret ever having to wake up again. My head is throbbing and my eyes still feel swollen from crying.

Thomas raises a brow at me. “It’s half past eight in the morning, Your Grace,” he says—as if that should mean anything to me. When I don’t answer, he sighs. “Your father is waiting for you in his apartments.”

“Is he?” I ask, alarmed.

“For breakfast.”

“Have I agreed to break my fast with him?”

“Apparently, it was discussed at dinner,” Thomas says as he begins to smooth out the bedclothes. It seems if I don’t get out of bed, he plans to make it up with me still in it.

I grumble and reluctantly move to slide off the mattress.

As always, Thomas dresses me efficiently while still somehow making it feel like a sacred ceremony. Every button and lace is meticulously checked and perfected, and then he sends me to sit with my tea while he folds my sleeping shirt.

I’m pouring myself a second cup of tepid tea when he approaches with a length of blue silk ribbon between his fingers. “This isn’t yours,” he says curiously as he holds it up for me to see.

I set the teacup down with a bit of a clang, gaping at the ribbon. *Curse you for a son of a bitch, Captain Sharpe.* I reach out to snatch it from Thomas, but he pulls it away and shoots me a harassed look.

My reaction, more than the discovery of such a ribbon, has clearly shocked him.

I get to my feet. “Give it to me,” I demand, holding out my hand.

He watches me for a moment, then steps forward to set the ribbon in my palm. Before I can squirrel it away, however, he snatches my wrist and holds me there. “I am your valet, Your Grace,” he says in earnest. “Your secrets are my secrets. I would never betray your trust.”

I swallow hard as I stare into his deep blue eyes—then nod, because if I speak, I’m afraid my voice will crack. He releases my wrist, and I stare down at the blue ribbon with a frown. I wonder if Captain Sharpe left it behind intentionally or by mistake. If the former . . . was it an act of defiance? Or a token of affection? I hate that I don’t know, but either way, my chest aches at the thought.

I sink back down into my chair and bring the ribbon up to my lips, pressing the salt-roughened silk to them and inhaling the scent of his hair. What a fool I am. No matter how it hurt to listen to his claims, how could I have sent him away like that?

The Viscount of Falmouth was right about one thing: I am cursed to be loveless.

Thomas says nothing as he tidies my hair. I'm still holding the ribbon against my lips when he reaches out to pluck it from my hand. For an instant I think I won't let him—but he's watching my face in the mirror, and I release it, allowing the silk to slide between my fingers.

With the deference of one leaving an offering in prayer, he weaves it carefully into my plait and ties it into a perfect bow. I am moved by his silent act of kindness. We lock gazes in the mirror, and I swallow hard as I offer him a nod of appreciation. Thomas squeezes my shoulder, and bless his tender heart, he doesn't say another thing about it as he crosses the room to fetch my boots.

No matter what kind of man Henry Stuart is, I will be forever grateful for the gift of someone like Thomas as my valet and companion.

The drawing room of my father's private apartments is warm, with a fire in the hearth and a feast laid out for us as I find myself alone with him for only the second time since my return. I take a fortifying breath before joining King Henry at the small dining table the servants have arranged for us in front of the fireplace.

"Thomas is working out for you, then?" he asks after swallowing the bite of roasted pheasant he took.

"He is," I say, cutting into my own helping. "Thank you for him. He's a wonder. I couldn't function without him."

Henry laughs. “That I believe,” he teases as he lifts a brass chalice to sip from it.

I lift my own chalice and peer into it as the heady scent of clove and cinnamon wafts into my nostrils. I blow away the steam, then take an experimental sip. Hot mulled wine—it’s delicious.

“Father,” I say experimentally as I set the chalice down.

Henry freezes and looks up at me. I think at first I have made an error, but as my mind scrambles for a way out, I see a smile broaden his face. “Yes?” he asks, his voice quiet.

I clear my throat and blow out a low puff of air. “I . . . had hoped to speak more of my mother.”

“I thought you might,” Henry says. “I fear I won’t have a great deal to tell you. I knew her barely a year, and most of that time she was married to the viscount and living in Falmouth.”

I was afraid of that, but I nod. “She was a follower of Islam, was she not?” I ask.

Henry pushes out his lips as he considers that. “I imagine she would have been, yes.”

I’m surprised by that answer. If he loved her so much, would he not *know*?

“Did she not convert to marry my fa—the viscount?”

“Ah, yes. We had a small ceremony to christen her beforehand, so you could be christened yourself.”

“And she was willing?”

Henry chuckles at that. “What an odd question, Christopher-Henry.”

I blink at him. *Is* it an odd question? Is it not obvious? “Forgive me . . . I just don’t know much about Islam . . . or about her.”

He waves a hand and takes another bite of pheasant. “She wanted what was best for you,” he says. “She loved you very much.”

I smile at the thought of that. “Did she?” I ask. “I wish I could have known her.”

“I still have some of her things,” Henry says, speaking over me. “The viscount sent them to me after your birth. They’re in storage somewhere.”

My eyes widen. “May I have them?”

“I don’t see why not. I’ll have the servants dig them up.”

“Is there a way for us to be in touch with her family?” I ask. “I would love to—”

“Afraid not,” he interrupts. “Her father didn’t approve of the marriage. He left with her sister, and we never heard from them again. It’s best not to dwell on that, Christopher-Henry. They are a . . . rather uncivilized people.”

I frown at that, thinking back to the kindness of the man in the marketplace when he taught me to smoke his pipe and called me the son of his sister. “I don’t think—”

“In any case, I’m sure they’ve long forgotten about the whole ordeal. That was nearly two decades ago.”

I blink at him. He can’t possibly think people simply stop caring about their loved ones because they *disagree* with one another. I’m alarmed by this callous way of thinking and annoyed that he keeps speaking over me. “I’d just like to—”

“Eat up,” he says, interrupting me again before I can finish my sentence. “Enjoy the food while it’s hot.”

“Yes, Father,” I mumble, seeing I am getting nowhere. I take a bite and watch him through my lashes. When I am sure his mouth is too full for him to speak, I try one more time. “That envelope with my name on it. What was in it?”

Henry lifts his gaze to meet mine and frowns. “The envelope?”

“The one Renard—er, Mr. Campbell used to turn me in.”

“Ah. You . . . never looked inside?”

“No. I never had the chance.”

I watch Henry’s face as he considers this and seems to come to some kind of decision. “Ah, it was nothing. Merely a few old letters.”

“From her?”

“From the viscount and me. Nothing to worry yourself with, Christopher-Henry.”

“But—”

“Come now, your wine is cooling.”

I narrow my eyes and lift my cup. If he won’t tell me, I’ll just have to find out for myself.

Thomas makes no complaint when I announce my need for a lie-down. I don’t know how long I slept, but I feel rested when I do wake. The fire in my bedroom is crackling, and Thomas is closing my bedroom door and making his way over to me.

“How long did I sleep?” I ask.

“Quite a while. Your supper is in the drawing room.” He picks up a pair of stockings from where they lie draped on the trunk at the foot of my bed.

“I can eat in my nightshirt,” I say, shaking my head.

“You have company, Your Grace. Lady Katherine and Lord Francis Stuart.”

“Ah—yes, that changes things.” I let him help me into my stockings and a pair of green breeches. He dresses me quickly, choosing a white shirt and gold waistcoat, with a green cravat to match my breeches. We don’t bother with a jacket. I slide into a pair of shoes as he makes quick work of smoothing and retying my hair back with Sharpe’s ribbon. Then I step out into the drawing room to join Kitty and Francis.

Francis jumps to his feet and bows to me. I join them at the table the servants set up in front of the fireplace and reach out to shake his hand. “No

formalities in my apartments," I say. Then I take Kitty's hand and kiss her knuckles with a smile, before Francis and I both sit.

"You look well," she says. "Thomas said you were under the weather."

"Just a headache," I say as I start in on my dinner. "The king told me he has a box of my mother's things."

Kitty perks up and smiles. "Does he?"

"So he says," I say with a sigh. "But I've yet to see them. Or the envelope I told you about the night of my return."

"Envelope?" Francis asks.

"An old envelope with my name on it. I found it in my fath—the Viscount of Falmouth's desk under lock and key."

Kitty frowns at me. "Can you not ask the king about it?"

"I asked him this morning. He avoided answering at first, then insisted I stop asking."

"What do you think is inside, Christopher-Henry?" Francis asks.

"I don't know," I say. "But there's something my father isn't telling me. Something he's going to great lengths to keep from me."

"You have your father. You have the crown. You're going to be king someday. Can you not be happy with what you have now?" Francis says.

I know he means well. A small part of me thinks I should be content and let my past remain a mystery for the sake of my own happiness. But I can't stop thinking about the look in Captain Sharpe's eyes when he said, "Men like Henry take what they want."

Those were the words of a man speaking from experience, and they haunt me—just as Billy's story haunts me. Men like the viscount, and my *true* father, do take what they want. Men like *me* take what we want.

But I refuse to be that sort of man anymore. I was wrong to send Sharpe away. I was wrong to doubt him, when he never gave me any reason to. I knew it at the time, but stubbornness and pride made me act irrationally.

And I know with sudden certainty that it isn’t Mr. Kit I can no longer be—it’s Christopher-Henry.

“No,” I say finally, my voice low as I stare into the glass of wine in my hands. “My whole life, I grew up thinking I had to be happy with whatever I was given. The viscount hated me; he never bothered to hide it. He told me I was cursed from birth because I killed my mother. He refused to touch me, lest my curse should be catching. He neglected me.

“And then I watched as he held Elizabeth in his arms and whispered words of love into her ear. I watched as he cradled Victoria after her birth and kissed her head and taught her to walk. I was forbidden from touching his new daughter. I was never allowed to be in a room alone with her, as if I might damage her. I thought I had to settle for what I had . . . but then I found my way onto a ship of miscreants, and they showed me that I don’t have to settle.”

I swallow hard and set my glass down, looking up at Francis and Kitty as they stare at me over the dinner table. Kitty has tears in her eyes, and Francis is speechless. I sound dramatic, I know—but I don’t care. My pulse is racing through my veins, throbbing in my chest and fingertips. My chest *aches* from the truth of it. I know now what I must do, even if the thought of it tears my heart asunder.

“I know what love feels like now. I have felt it in the marrow of my bones, and I won’t settle for less ever again.”

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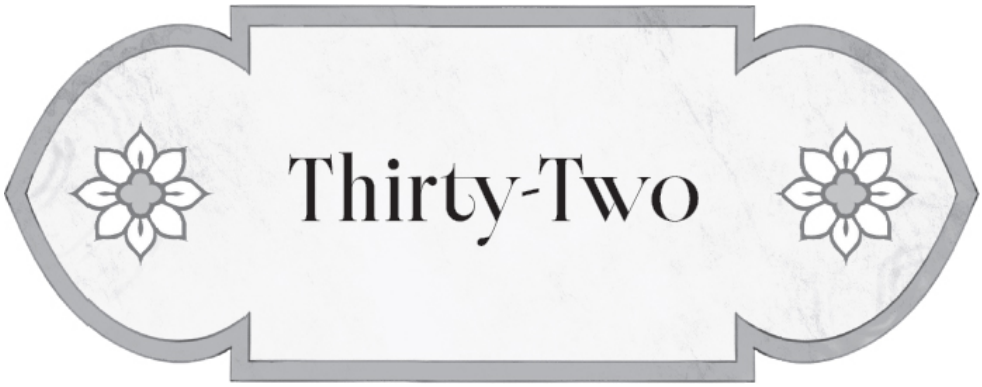

Thirty-Two

“Thomas, I have a favor to ask,” I say the next morning as he slides my indigo waistcoat onto my shoulders.

“Anything, Your Grace,” he says.

Kitty and Francis stayed late into the night to keep me company as I worked through the immense decision before me. According to the clock over the tidy desk in my drawing room, it was half past one in the morning when I finally retired myself, after sitting for another hour to write a few letters of my own.

I take one of the envelopes from under my pillow, where I stashed them once Thomas finished making up the bed, and turn to face him as he lifts a Bordeaux-colored cravat. Before he can tie it on me, I hand the envelope over to him. “Take this letter down to the docks for me. There are instructions inside the envelope for you. I’ve explained everything.”

“Your Grace?” Thomas asks as he takes the envelope, as well as the purse I offer. He frowns and looks up at me. “Is everything all right?”

“It will be,” I say. “Do this for me?”

“Of course.”

Bless Thomas—he is truly the most loyal servant a man could ever ask for. I have done nothing to deserve his blind devotion, but I am appreciative of it all the same. I smile and clasp his shoulder, then drop my arms and tilt my chin back so he might tie my cravat on for me.

I am wearing my wig today, without Captain Sharpe's silk ribbon. The jacket Thomas helps me into is the same soft periwinkle as my breeches. I take a moment to admire his work before drawing in a deep breath.

"Thank you, Thomas," I say as I turn to him and smile once more. "Come to me when you return from the docks. I'll have one more favor to ask of you."

He nods as he holds the envelope and purse in his hands. "I will come straightaway," he promises. "Now, your father is waiting for you in his drawing room. Shall I—"

"No, I can find my own way there. This is more important." I reach out to grasp his shoulder, squeezing it gently. "It's *very* important."

"I understand," he says with a nod, but I can see by his expression that he doesn't. Not yet. He will once he has read the note inside, and that's all that matters. I nod back at him and leave my apartments to join my father for breakfast.

When I arrive, the king's apartments are a flurry of activity. My father stands over a desk with two of his counselors, men I have yet to meet. I wait for him by the fireplace, fiddling with my cravat until his hand on my shoulder startles me into turning to face him.

"Good morning, Your Royal Highness," I say—because we are still not alone in the room and I am not yet comfortable enough to call him Father in front of people.

"Good morning, son," he says with a smile. "Come, let's eat. There is much to do today."

"Is there?"

He nods as we take a seat at the table. "Christmas Day is fast approaching. I have twelve days to plan the announcement of you as my

heir.”

I grimace but don’t say anything. Instead I bury my nose in my cup of tea as our plates are set down before us. Henry watches me; I can feel his gaze on me as I drink my tea. When I finally lower the cup, he is still staring at me with a queer expression on his face.

“What?”

“That reminds me,” he says, staring at my hand. He snaps his fingers and turns to his valet. “Haines,” he says. “Fetch me the box by my bed.”

“Sir,” Haines says with a nod, then makes his way into the king’s bedchamber. I am suddenly reminded that once a servant is elevated to valet, it’s no longer appropriate to use his first name. I should have been calling Thomas “Lancaster” this whole time. I hope I haven’t offended him by using his Christian name instead.

“What?” Henry asks.

I realize I must have been making a face. “It only just occurred to me . . . I’ve been calling Thomas by his first name.”

My father chuckles and lifts his fork. “You’re still learning. It hasn’t yet been a fortnight.”

Haines returns after a few minutes with a beautiful jeweled box. I set my fork down as he puts it on the table between the king and myself.

“I do hope you aren’t planning to propose,” I say as the king opens the box. “I’m not sure how appropriate that would be.”

My father laughs and removes a small, blue velvet pouch, before closing the box and handing it back to Haines. “I have something for you.” I watch as he opens the pouch, then reaches for my hand. When I offer it, he turns it palm up and drops the contents there.

Two rings glint in the sunlight. I raise my brows as I bring them close to my face to inspect them. One is solid gold, with the royal seal upon it. The other is a large, expensively cut ruby, set in a bed of small diamonds on a gold band. I swallow hard as I lift my gaze to Henry’s face.

He’s smiling at me. “Those are yours,” he says. “The royal seal for your left hand, and the ruby for your right.”

“You favor rubies,” I observe, because I don’t know what else to say.

He smiles a little wider. “Of course,” he says. “They are your birthstone.”

At that, I am stunned into silence. I am moved by the knowledge that he has chosen *my* birthstone as the symbol of his reign. I swallow down my heart and slide the rings carefully onto my fingers. “I don’t know what to say . . . ,” I whisper.

“I have loved you from afar your entire life, Christopher-Henry,” he says as he clasps my hand. “I would have recognized you as my heir from the start if I could have . . . but in those days I did not have my father’s favor, and I could not risk falling out with him.”

I nod, because I cannot speak.

“I am sorry it took me until now. I had to hold out hope that Eleanor would grant me a legitimate heir, but when it became clear that she could not . . .”

A wave of sadness washes through me. I think back to what Captain Sharpe said about Henry wanting me now only because I am useful to him. He was right; of course he was right. But I cling anyway to Henry’s promise that he loved me from the start, even if he didn’t show it. Even if he didn’t come for me.

Maybe he really did love me when I was born. It would be pretty to think that *someone* did.

“Thank you, Father,” I say, reaching out to take his hand and squeeze it. His gaze falls to the ruby on my finger, and he seems to swell with pride. I have never had someone look at me this way, and it breaks my heart to see it now.

He clears his throat and releases my hand. “It suits you,” he says as he lifts his fork.

“May I ask you for one more thing?” I ask. “Even though you’ve already given me so much.”

Henry’s expression turns wary, and I know he thinks I mean to ask again about the envelope with my name on it. But that’s not what I want from him now. I may never see the contents of that envelope—but maybe, just maybe, they don’t have to matter anymore.

“I’d like to see my mother’s things,” I say instead. “You said you would look for them. Have you been able to find them yet?”

Henry clears his throat again and gives a sigh, as if relieved. “Oh, that,” he says. “Yes, Katherine asked me about them this morning. I had no idea you two had become so close.”

“She and Francis have been kind enough to keep me in check.”

Henry laughs and nods. “She is good at that. I will have them sent to your rooms tonight. There isn’t much, but perhaps you’ll find something in there that you can wear in her honor at Christmas.”

I smile and return to my breakfast. “A token in her honor would be just the thing.”

By the time I finally leave my father’s apartments, I am frustrated, tired, sad, and . . . determined. I have never been very good at crafting well-thought-out choices; split-second, reckless decisions have always been my forte. But in this case, I can’t quite tell which is which.

I can’t stop thinking of the expression on Sharpe’s face when I ordered him from my rooms—of the betrayal there. A shiver runs through me as I remember the cold fury in his eyes, and I am so distracted, I very nearly collide into another body in the halls.

I stop short, and so does he. For a moment we simply stare at each other, him towering over me—though not quite as much as he used to.

Instinctively, I straighten my back and tilt my chin up. “Falmouth,” I say with an air of such casual contempt that I impress even myself.

Distracted as I was, I am proud of how quickly I regained control.

His brow twitches. I know he hates that I outrank him now. I know he hates that I can speak to him without his titles. That I can take whatever I like from him.

My ex-father bows at the waist, and it’s *almost* a perfect bow. I suspect some defiant part of him is so revolted at the idea of obeisance to me that he finds proper form difficult.

Good.

“You’re looking well, Christopher-Henry,” he says.

“You mean ‘Your Grace,’” I remind him, and I revel in the way his eyes darken and his shoulders tense.

“Of course. Your *Grace*.”

I smile a little and hold out my hand, freshly ornamented with the ruby of my father’s reign. I wait in silence for him to react. When he does, I can see that it pains him to do so. He takes my hand in his and touches his lips to the ring in a kiss so brief that perhaps he can convince himself it did not actually happen.

But it did.

I take my hand back and make a show of brushing my thumb against my first and middle fingers, as if to shake off the lingering filth of his skin touching my own. I say nothing as I do it, but I can see the change in his demeanor: the darkening of his features and the furrowing of his brow.

“On your way to grovel before my father, are you?” I ask.

His eyes widen a little, and I can see that he’s searching his memory for some insult he might have paid to his dear friend King Henry.

I smile slowly. “I haven’t told him yet about how well you raised me,” I say—and there is a clear threat behind my words. He knows it, and I know it. “He’s having a box of her things sent to my rooms tonight. I don’t

imagine there will be anything inside it you'd have an objection to my seeing."

I watch his throat bob as he tries to work out where I am going with this. "It's not I who have something to hide, Your Grace," he says carefully.

I watch his face and frown. "No?" I ask. "And yet you did keep her hidden from me. The king gifted me her portrait. Did you know he had one of her?"

"Of course I knew," he says. He sounds agitated now. "I had the portrait done before she began to show. It was commissioned at *my* expense for your father, the king."

I'm surprised by this, and I can't hide that. Falmouth doesn't leap on my momentary lapse, though. I'm not sure it's a point in his favor, but I'm relieved he doesn't take the opportunity.

"I never wanted you. I never wanted your mother. When I married her, she didn't speak a word of English *or* French. For eight months she lived with me and never spoke a word to me. Her only purpose in my household was to raise *you* when you were born—and then you killed her and ruined that, too."

My stomach drops and I draw in a shaking breath. "I think you've said quite enough to me for today," I say, struggling to keep my voice even. I narrow my eyes at him, and he can do nothing as I wave my hand like one might swat away an annoying gnat. "You're dismissed."

I start to step past him, but pause and turn to look at him once more. "Ah . . . I almost forgot." I dig into my pocket and hold up his signet ring. "I imagine you'll be wanting this back . . . since I have no need of it anymore." I make a point of showing him my new ring before dropping his onto the floor at my feet.

I don't wait to watch him splutter. I march past him with my chin up and my back straight. It's not the first time he has accused me of killing my mother—nor is it that accusation that shocks me to my core. I know he's telling me the truth, because he doesn't know what he's just revealed to me.

When I return to my rooms, Thomas is waiting for me. He looks harassed, and now I know he's understood why I sent him down to the docks. I swallow hard as I walk into my bedroom. "Is it done?" I ask.

"Your Grace—"

"Please," I whisper. "Please, Thomas . . . say you did this for me?"

He stares at me for a long moment, and I think he's going to say that he's refused to follow the instructions in the letter, but then he sets his mouth into a grim line and nods.

Relief washes over me, and I cup his face to stare into his eyes. "Thank you."

"But, Your Grace—"

The door to my drawing room opens, and Thomas and I both whirl to see who would enter without my permission. My shoulders slacken when Kitty's face appears in the doorway, wearing a bright smile.

"Kit, come and see!"

I glance at Thomas, and after a silent exchange I leave his side to join Kitty in the drawing room. Francis is already standing by the fire, and two footmen are leaving the room. On the table by the sofa is a small wooden chest with a familiar latticed design painted on the top.

My pulse quickens as I approach the chest and lay my hand on it, breath hitching in my throat. "It was hers?" I ask.

Kitty nods and sits down in front of it. "It isn't very heavy," she says by way of apology. "I suppose there isn't much inside."

I swallow hard and glance at Francis, who turns away from me after a moment. I must look as if I'm about to burst into tears, and he doesn't want to embarrass me. I take in a slow breath and close my eyes. I am not going to cry. I'm not.

"Thomas," I say. "I mean—damnation, I should be calling you Lancaster."

“Thomas is fine, Your Grace,” he says as he steps out of my room. He sees the box, and then my face, and understands immediately. With a nod, he makes his way to the wine decanter in the corner of the room and quickly pours three glasses of red wine.

Once he has handed them out, I take a long drink to fortify myself, then set the glass on the table beside my mother’s memory box. I lick my lips and brush my fingers over the lockless latch. Then I flip the clasp and slowly lift the top.

I can tell at once that it hasn’t been opened in many years, likely tucked away from the moment my mother left this earth. The inside of the box smells of dust, and jasmine, and citrus. I lay the top back all the way and reach in to touch the folded piece of silk on top of the pile. It’s beautifully preserved, the mustard yellow and red and orange design still seems as vivid as the day it was made. I pull it out slowly and unfold it.

It’s some kind of large scarf, the silk so fine and delicate on my fingers. I swallow again as my heart creeps up into my throat, then bring the silk to my nose and inhale deeply. I imagine this is how she smelled: like earth and oranges, and a hint of cinnamon.

I look back into the box and see a tiny golden tincture jar sitting on a bit of velvet. I lift it out and turn it over in my hands.

“What is that?” Kitty asks.

“I have no idea,” I say, holding it out to her.

As she examines it, I reach in again and lift out a small velvet pouch, not unlike the one in which Henry stored my rings, but red with a golden string tying it shut. When I open it and pour the contents into my palm, recognition sets my heart skittering all over again.

“Her earrings,” I gasp as I stare down at the perfect pearl drop earrings my mother wore the day she was painted in miniature. I stare up at the ceiling and blink a few times, then reach for my glass of wine and take another long gulp.

Keep it together, Kit.

“Ah!” Kitty exclaims, and I am glad for her cheerful interruption. I look at her and see she is holding the tincture jar in two pieces.

For a moment I am horrified. She’s broken it!

But then she puts them back together and twists, and I realize the jar was meant to open.

“What’s inside?” I ask, putting the earrings back into the pouch and sliding it into my waistcoat pocket. I reach out for the bottle and Kitty hands it over.

“It’s like those tiny glass perfume jars,” she says. “But it’s brass . . . and the top twists off.”

I twist and lift the top off myself. A copper rod covered in black powder slides out of the jar, and I stare at it curiously. I touch the tip of it with my finger and black smears across my skin. I furrow my brow as I stare at it, but I don’t want to mess my clothes, so I close the jar again carefully and rub my fingers together to get the black smear off.

“I know what this is,” I say. “I don’t know what it’s called, but I saw a Turkish man in Nassau with black smudged around his eyes. And my mother’s portrait is the same.”

The last thing inside the box is a worn but beautiful book bound in painted leather, embossed and inlaid with gold leaf. I lift it out carefully and draw in a shaking breath as I run my fingers over the textured surface. A deeply detailed design of leaves and flowers borders the cover on both sides, and there is a matching design on the spine. In the middle of the border is a beautiful array of similar flowers, mixed with birds and great colorful moths.

“What’s that?” Kitty asks, and even Francis has stepped over to see.

I stare down at the book and its worn edges, then gingerly open the front cover. The writing inside is unfamiliar to me, and I realize with a pang that it must be Turkish. “My mother was a follower of Islam,” I say quietly, as if to speak too loudly while holding this book would be somehow irreverent—

something I've never felt while holding the King James Bible. "This must be her holy book."

She must have been so lonely, my poor mother. No one to speak to, only my father and his servants to keep her company, and none of them able to communicate with her. An infidel's baby growing in her belly—for that's how she would have viewed it. Henry said she loved me and wanted what was best for me, but in truth I think she must have hated me.

She must have hated *him*.

I should have believed Captain Sharpe. I should have listened to him when he told me the truth of how it likely was between them. My mother had no advocate. She had no choice. She was entirely alone in this world, and I was the final curse that took her from it.

I lift my gaze and suck in a tremulous breath as I close the book and press it to my chest. "Thank you, Kitty," I whisper. "This is the most wonderful Christmas gift I could ever ask for."

She looks startled at that, but she smiles and shakes her head. "Don't be silly," she says. "I can't take credit for bringing this to you."

"I know it was you who insisted Henry give it to me." I lean forward and press a kiss to her cheek. "And I am more thankful than I can possibly say."

I wrap the book in the silk scarf, set it back in the box, and lay the brass jar on top of it. Then I reach into my pocket to pull out the earrings once more. "Does anyone know how to pierce ears?" I ask as I admire them.

"Christopher-Henry," Francis gasps. "You can't possibly."

Kitty's eyes widen, as if she, too, wants to protest but can't find the words.

I turn to Thomas, who looks resigned. "I can fetch a physician to do it for you, Your Grace."

"No," Francis insists. "No, absolutely not! Your father would kill you."

I smile at Thomas and then turn to touch Francis's shoulder. "I won't tell if you don't."

He looks exasperated. “Somehow I think people will notice.”

“Won’t that be fun?” I ask with a little grin. “My father *did* say I was born to scandal. Let’s prove him right.”

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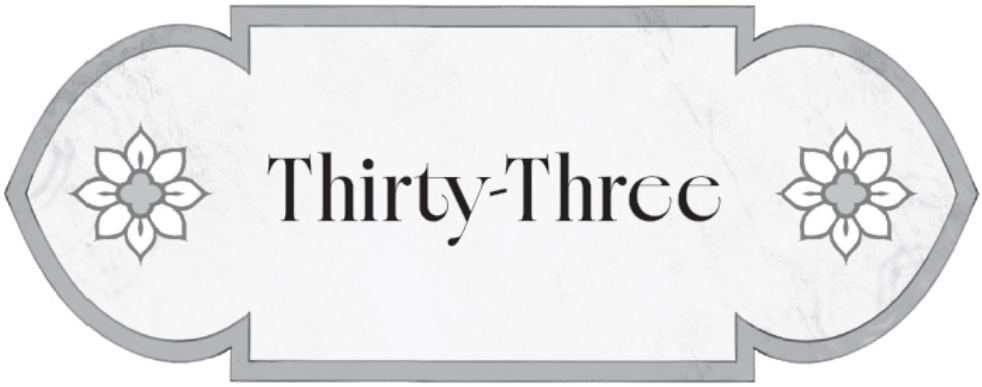

"You're certain you want to go through with this, Your Grace?" Thomas asks me some hours later as I stare at the newest addition to my ears in the mirror. The physician tried to refuse; in the end I had to sweeten the pot with a small pile of coin.

I've also attempted to use my mother's eye charcoal, or whatever it is. I haven't figured out how to use it properly, so it's a bit of a mess . . . but I'm enjoying the striking, defiant quality it adds to my features. It makes me look more Turkish than English, and I am proud to display this side of myself. I like seeing my mother in my own reflection.

I like feeling like *me*.

"It's a little too late to turn back now, don't you think?" I ask, touching one earring with a wince.

"That's not what I mean," Thomas snaps at me.

I turn to him with my most charming smile, knowing very well that it won't work. "What do you think?"

He sighs and tilts his head to admire the pearls as they hang from my ears. "Do they hurt?"

"Very much," I say cheerfully.

“Good.”

I snort and stand back to let him help me into my jacket. I’ve dressed in dark colors to make it easier to sneak around unseen: black breeches and jacket, with an emerald-green waistcoat. My hair is freshly cut, courtesy of Thomas, to better show off my mother’s earrings—and to prevent them from getting caught in my curls as I sleep.

He left it a little longer on the top than I used to keep it, and it makes me look very dashing and *very* disreputable. He knows me so well already.

“All right . . . Go on to your room for the night. They’ll think you’ve left me to sleep, and you can come back in the morning like usual to wake me.”

I turn to the trunk in front of my bed and move to lift one side of it, grunting softly. Is it me, or is it heavier than it was a few hours ago? I frown and reach for the handle, but Thomas approaches and touches my shoulder.

“Allow me to help you.”

“No, you have to be seen leaving my rooms.”

“Let me worry about that later. The two of us can carry it.”

I want to say no; I’d rather he was not involved in what I am about to do. But I can’t carry this thing on my own—and really, I don’t want to be alone in this moment. I press my lips together and nod. “Thank you, Thomas.”

I nod to the trunk and we step to either side of it, lifting it easily with our combined strength. Nine-months-ago Christopher-Henry could never.

“What are you smiling about?” Thomas asks me.

I look up at him and my grin widens a little. “Just thinking about someone I used to know.”

“This is madness, Your Grace,” Thomas whispers to me frantically in the moonless dark of the London docks.

“Stop calling me that,” I hiss back at him. “You didn’t have to come with me.”

“I couldn’t let you do this alone! And besides, you are a paragon of poor decision-making, and it’s *my* responsibility to keep you in check.”

I give a breathy laugh and look at him. I appreciate his coming this far with me, but I would hate for him to take the blame for what I am about to do.

When we left Kensington Palace, it was nearly one in the morning. I have no idea what time it is now, but the blue hour has yet to come upon us, so I think it is still before three o’clock. The stars, and the occasional gas lamp, were our only light as we made our way into the streets of lower London, booked a buggy to the docks, and finally walked down, lugging the trunk between us, to the slumbering ships as they rocked in the quiet predawn waves.

“Are you sure this man is going to show up, Your Gr—Christopher-Henry?”

“For Christ’s sake, Thomas. Call me Kit.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You’re going to get us caught.”

He sets his mouth into a line and stops short, causing me to nearly drop the trunk. I grunt and glare at him. “What are you doing?”

He isn’t looking at me, though. Instead he’s staring at something just over my shoulder.

“You lot don’t belong down here,” a gruff voice says from behind me.

I do drop the trunk then, spinning toward the shadowy form that caught Thomas’s attention. My eyes widen, and I give a laugh as I step forward and grab Mr. Tydes by the shoulders.

“Tydes, you old bastard,” I blurt.

“From one bastard to another,” Mr. Tydes says, swatting my hands away from him.

“How I missed you, Mr. Tydes,” I muse.

He gives a whistle, and two more figures come running down the dock toward us. I gasp when I see them, my heart swelling as I open my arms, and Tristan launches himself into me, knocking me back until I fall onto the trunk with a grunt.

He buries his face in my neck and squeezes me so hard, I'm sure a rib cracks. Before I can beg him to let go, Trevor has him by the collar. He yanks Tristan off me, then pulls me up and into a less violent embrace, slapping his hands on my back.

"Tristan said ye wouldn't abandon us," he says into my ear, then steps back to look at me. "I told him he was placin' a losin' bet on ye."

I grin at Trevor and pat his cheek affectionately. "You always hold me in such high regard," I say.

"I'm just being *pragmatic*," he says, mocking my London accent. I snort and shove him back a step, but he holds me firm. "What have ye gone 'n' done to yer head?" he asks.

Tristan taps one of the earrings, and I swat his hand away. "They're tender," I whine.

"They're ridiculous," Trevor says.

"I like them," Tristan chimes in. "They're just ridiculous enough for our Kit. Like the black stuff on his eyes!"

"I'm touched, Tris. Help me with this trunk," I say as I search for the one face I hoped to see.

"He's not here," Mr. Tydes says.

I turn to face him. "Where is he?"

Mr. Tydes grimaces and shrugs, as if *that* answers anything. My stomach drops. Is he not coming? I think back to the argument we had, the way I told him to get out or I'd call the guard on him. I threatened his *life* because his honesty hurt my feelings.

Oh, I'm such a coward.

I swallow hard and turn to Thomas, who is trying his best not to look out of place. I step up to him and reach into my jacket pocket to pull out

three envelopes. “Take these back to the palace with you,” I say, pushing them into his hand.

Each of them is sealed with the royal seal, which I still wear. One for Katherine Stuart, one for the Viscount of Falmouth, and the last for my father: Henry Stuart, King of England. I couldn’t bring myself to say goodbye to any of them in person, even after everything. Not even Kitty—that’s how much of a coward I am.

“I’ve recommended you to Francis’s service,” I explain as Thomas stares down at the envelopes. “He’ll take good care of you. Francis is almost as boring as my father when he dresses . . . but I’m sure you and Kitty can bully him into a nice shade of chartreuse.”

Thomas gives a quiet laugh. “Chartreuse?” he asks, incredulous.

“Mm-hmm,” I say with a nod. “With seafoam trimmings.”

He laughs again and shakes his head. “The man you asked me to find . . . he isn’t here?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No. I . . . I betrayed his trust. He tried to make me see reason, and I cast him off.”

“This man . . . the one who owns the blue silk ribbon I left at the inn,” Thomas whispers. “He’s the one who broke your curse?”

My eyes widen. I hadn’t realized he had been listening when I told Kitty and Francis about the curse the viscount had burdened me with. But of course he was listening. He has ears, and he was in the room. I’m just as foolish as every other member of the gentry, who treat their servants like furniture when they aren’t interacting with them.

I still have a lot to learn.

I swallow hard and lower my eyes. “I thought so.”

“He’ll be here,” Thomas insists.

I force a brief smile, but I’m not sure I agree. I look back at the dock, where Tristan and Trevor are carrying my trunk up the gangplank of our new ship. “I’ll be all right with them. They’re my brothers. They always have my back.”

“You could still come home.”

I draw in a slow breath as I watch the silhouette of Trevor, Tristan, and the trunk disappear onto the deck of the ship. “This *is* my home,” I whisper. “I belong to the sea.” It feels like the most honest thing I’ve ever said, and though my heart aches at Sharpe’s absence, I know without a single doubt that I’ve made the right choice.

“You, lad,” Thomas says, and I turn to see whom he’s talking to.

A passing dockhand stops with a blink. “Aye, sir?”

Thomas approaches the boy and hands him my letters. “Take these letters to Kensington Palace.” I see him pull out the purse I gave him earlier and drop a few coins into the boy’s hand. “Tell no one how you came to have them.”

The boy squints down at the coins in the dark, then gasps and looks up at Thomas with a grin. “Yes, sir,” he says.

He hurries off before I can stop him. “Thomas,” I say. “What are you __”

“I’m your valet, Your Grace,” he says stubbornly, straightening his back. “I can’t have you growing a beard and forgoing your jackets like some commoner.”

I laugh breathlessly and shake my head. “Thomas, you don’t want to come with me. It’s not exactly going to be a leisure trip. This . . . this is life at sea.”

“If *you* can handle it, Your Grace, I’m quite sure I can. Besides, I helped young Lord William and Mr. Tydes decide which vessel to invest in.”

The dig at my survival skills does not go unnoticed, but I am too charmed by his devotion to say anything. “Are you *sure* you want to do this?”

“It’s too late to back out now. My things are already on the ship.”

My brows shoot up and I gasp. “Your . . . ?” I look up at the rail of the ship, and then back at Thomas. “That’s why the bloody trunk was so bloody heavy!”

He smiles and puts a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll prepare your stateroom, Your Grace,” he says as he starts up the gangplank.

I watch him board the ship in silent awe. How did someone like *me* inspire such loyalty from someone as pure and good as Thomas Lancaster? Either he’s mad, or I am even more charming than I realize. I follow him onto the ship.

It’s a fine ship. I sent Thomas with enough money to buy a man-of-war if I had wanted, but my instructions to Thomas requested a luxury merchant vessel. Something fine but still useful. My gaze falls to the open door leading into the captain’s cabin, and my chest tightens.

I thought to share this cabin with Captain Sharpe, as we had on the *Deliverance*. But I suppose I’ll have to learn to captain on my own. I wonder if I can inspire even half the devotion from the crew that Captain Sharpe did. Somehow I doubt it.

I step into the cabin, which is lit with sconces on the walls and a few candles. It’s similar to the cabin on the *Deliverance*, but with newer fixtures, and it lacks the abundance of weaponry and the filth of longtime use on the walls. I wonder who owned this ship just yesterday? I wonder if he had to be bullied into selling it, or if he’s happy now to retire to a life of leisure with his profits.

Thomas has already started sifting through the trunk to unpack my things. He’s taken my mother’s memory box out and set it on the sofa, and I can see the trunk I brought from Falmouth sitting at the foot of the bed. They must have brought it for me from the *Deliverance*. I smile and step toward it.

“This is a mighty fine ship,” murmurs a familiar, melodious voice from behind me.

I freeze and my eyes widen. My heart does a giddy little leap, even as my eyes prick from the sting of tears. I have to remind myself to inhale as I turn to face him.

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Thirty-Four

Captain Reggie Sharpe stands in the doorway, staring at me with his deep brown eyes narrowed and a smug little smirk on his face. He's adopted a casual pose, leaning against the doorjamb with one leg bent. But I know him far too well, and his limbs are just a bit too stiff for him to convince me.

He wears the blue silk ribbon in his hair once more, and my heart skitters excitedly at the sight of it. I told Thomas to give it to him, or at the very least to leave it with the innkeeper for him, and that he'd know what it meant. I'm so glad he did.

I let out a breath and wipe tears from my cheek. "I was afraid you weren't coming."

"And miss the chance to watch the bastard Prince of England turn to a life of piracy, *on purpose* this time, right before my eyes?"

I laugh at that, and then he steps forward, and I surge into his embrace, throwing my arms around his neck. I don't give him the chance to ask me permission, nor do I concern myself with Thomas's sensibilities. I lean in and crush my mouth to his, and my captain gives a startled little moan but cups the back of my head and deepens the kiss, holding me tight to him.

When we finally break away, we are both panting—and though I am crying, Sharpe is laughing softly. He wipes my cheek with his thumb and kisses my temple. “Your kohl is smudging,” he murmurs.

“Is that what it’s called?” I ask with a laugh.

“Yes. And you aren’t wearing it correctly.” Then we both laugh, and he kisses me again, before leaning back to look me over. “Your mother’s earrings,” he notices, and I love him for remembering them from her portrait. I nod, and he combs his fingers through my hair. “Very dashing.”

“They hurt terribly,” I say, laughing through my tears.

“That’ll pass,” he promises with a smile.

“I still have to teach you to read,” I remind him.

Sharpe laughs and bumps his forehead against mine. “I suppose we’ll have to hunt for a new filthy novel,” he murmurs, his breath warm against my cheek.

“Reggie.”

With me still in his arms, Sharpe turns to face Mr. Tydes, who looks annoyed that we’re wasting so much time.

“What’s our heading?”

“Portsmouth, to get our men,” Sharpe says.

Mr. Tydes nods and glances at Thomas, lifting a brow and then rolling his eyes, before he steps out of the cabin and begins to bark orders at the ship’s skeleton crew.

I turn in Sharpe’s arms to glance back at Thomas myself. He’s standing beside the bed, holding one of my jackets and just *staring* at Captain Sharpe and myself. Maybe I was wrong to ignore his sensibilities. I carefully pull away from Sharpe and turn to face Thomas.

“There’s still time for you to disembark,” I tell him.

Sharpe follows my gaze, as if he hadn’t noticed him there before. He says nothing, though—just waits for Thomas to answer.

Thomas straightens his back and squares his shoulders into perfect posture. “I have no intention of doing that.”

I make my way over to Thomas and take the jacket from him. “I won’t consider it disloyal if you do,” I say to him, my voice low. Though it would pain me to see him leave now, I don’t want him to be uncomfortable. I don’t want him to hate this choice.

He looks at Captain Sharpe and then back to me. “Your Grace, if you think I am shocked by your inclination toward men . . . I must tell you that you are a great deal less discreet than you think you are.”

Captain Sharpe laughs from behind me, and I whirl to shoot him a silencing look. He smirks at me and saunters farther into the room, instead of cowering away like he *should*. I turn back to Thomas, ignoring Sharpe as he begins to rifle through my things. I can see Thomas is staring at him, and I tap his arm. “Ignore him,” I say. “He’s trying to get a rise out of you.”

“It’s working,” Thomas says.

I smile at that. “If you really aren’t bothered by it, I would very much like for you to stay. But I’m not sure you should keep calling me Your Grace.”

“I won’t call you Kit.”

“We can do battle later,” I say with a chuckle. “For now, I think Captain Sharpe owes us a tour of our new ship. And we’ll need to find you a room.”

“Rooms are for officers,” Sharpe points out.

“Thomas is my valet. He’ll have a room. And my trunk from Falmouth—he can keep his things in it.”

“You aren’t a prince on this ship, Kitten,” Sharpe says with an amused smirk. “You don’t get to give orders.”

I lift my brow and smile slowly. I have no intention of backing down, and he knows it. “Watch me.”

Of course I win the battle for Thomas's room. He's given the first one belowdecks, so he can come and go from the captain's cabin with ease. It isn't large, but he's happy with it. My old trunk is brought down and secured to the floor at the foot of his bed.

This ship is smaller than the *Deliverance*, and though the officers' staterooms are a bit cramped, there are more of them. Mr. Tydes, Billy, and Cook, of course, will each have their own rooms. I've given the twins one to share as well—and the joint responsibility of boatswain.

Captain Sharpe lets me do all this, likely only because he agrees with me. As I stand on deck and rattle off my decisions with the sunrise at my back, he lounges on the stairs to the quarterdeck, looking amused. I can tell Mr. Tydes is annoyed by Sharpe allowing me to give orders like this, but he must agree with my decisions as well, for even though he's scowling at me, he's also nodding along.

It will take less than a day to sail to Portsmouth. It might be quicker had we more than eight men on board. Thomas and I don't count, so six able-bodied men are currently sailing this ship. We take our time, but it is a short journey, and the weather is cold but clear. When we port at Portsmouth, it's sunset, and Thomas, Sharpe, and Trevor are the only three to disembark. Thomas to buy provisions for himself and me—whatever it is he thinks we need that we don't already have, of course. Sharpe and Trevor to gather the men, who will each do their own due diligence in stocking the ship.

I don't see the *Deliverance* at port. I look out at the ships, but although I see a few damaged ones, she isn't one of them.

"Where is she?" I ask Tristan as we stand together at the rail.

"Destroyed," he says with a sigh. "We got what we could off her, 'n' then we sold her for parts. Mr. Tydes sold the sugar 'n' silks."

I nod and look at him. "Was anyone hurt?"

Tristan shakes his head and crosses his arms with a shiver. "The navy didn't bother with us once they had ye. Cap'n agreed not to follow 'em, 'n' so they agreed to leave us be. I guess they didn't feel like dealin' with us, 'n' they likely thought we'd sink anyway."

“Renard is probably imprisoned at Newgate,” I say, staring out at the docks for any glimpse of a familiar face. “I’m sure they’ll hang him, if they haven’t already.”

“That’s the easy way out,” Tristan says sharply. “He’s lucky the navy took him ’n’ didn’t leave him with us. We have ways of dealin’ with mutineers.”

It sounds so harsh—but I suppose when you live at sea, you have to be. “Do you think I’ll have any trouble with the men?”

Tristan’s mouth turns down into a quizzical frown. “’Cause yer a prince?”

I shrug.

“It’s not much different than ye bein’ a viscount,” he offers with a shrug.

I laugh at that. “It’s quite a great deal different, I assure you.”

Tristan squints at me, like he’s trying to decide whether what he has to say will offend me. “Words are words,” he says. “Ye don’t have a kingdom er land er a crown. They call ye a prince, but ye aren’t really. Just like ye weren’t really a viscount. Yer just Kit.”

I chuckle a little and lean against the rail. “I suppose you have a point. What about Thomas?”

Tristan grins. “Oh, I ’spect he’ll have as easy a time as you did the first few months.”

Poor Thomas. “Go easy on him.”

Tristan shrugs a bit. “We’ll see. Ah! There!” He points to the docks. “It’s Billy ’n’ Naeem! And Trev!”

I look where he’s pointing and see that he’s right. Billy, Naeem, and Cook are coming toward the ship along with a few other men, Trevor leading the way, each carrying various sacks and crates. Soon enough the deck is alive with the noise and chaos I’ve grown used to, with men coming and going as they set up rigging to haul things up on deck.

I greet the men as they board, and they slap me on the back or bow to me to try to make me uncomfortable. I let them. Because even if they *are*

making fun of me, this is what I missed the most: being *one* of them.

The men, myself included, don't seem to relax entirely until they see the sliver of land that is England drop into the horizon. Even so, I may never truly relax again. Though my father has no way of knowing where I went, someday someone will recognize me, and word of where I am will get back to him. No one has said it out loud, but I'm sure the crew know that the threat of being found hangs ever-present in the air.

Well. I suppose it's an occupational hazard.

The night crew is at work on deck now, and Thomas has already come to serve me evening tea and undress me for bed, even though I insisted that it's not necessary. I sip my tea as I sit in the wingback chair by the stove. Thomas has built a small fire in it, and its warmth radiates into the room.

"If I may, Your Grace," he says after carefully sealing the stove and rising to his feet.

I look up at him, and the serious expression on his face makes me set the cup of tea back onto the saucer. "Thomas?"

"I must confess something," he says. "I've committed a crime against the Crown, and therefore against you."

"Christ, Thomas," I say, getting to my feet. "What are you on about?"

He pulls something from the inner pocket of his livery waistcoat, and at once recognition shudders through my bones. I am rooted to the spot, my gaze locked on to the familiar writing across the front of the worn envelope he holds.

Has he read it? How is that a crime? I swallow hard, but I can't speak, so I wait for him to raise his gaze to meet mine. He looks ashamed, which is nonsense. I could kiss him, would it not be a horrid abuse of my power.

"I stole this from the king's chamber. I . . ." He draws in a deep breath. "I believe it means something to you."

I step forward and take his hands in mine firmly. “Thomas,” I say as he stares at me with wide eyes. “You risked so much to get this for me. You are the greatest friend any man could ever ask for.”

His shoulders relax, his grip on the envelope slackening. I take it from him and draw him into a tight hug, one hand grasping the back of his neck. He allows it—and after a moment he relaxes a little, and we are embracing, as brothers.

When his body slackens just a little more, I follow his cue and release him, taking a step back and staring down at the envelope. “I can’t thank you enough,” I say. “You have no idea what this means to me.”

“I heard him order Haines to burn it after he gave you the rings. I swapped it out for another envelope with your name on it, stuffed with blank paper. I don’t think he realized. What do you think is inside it, Your Grace?”

I swallow hard and finger the broken seal. “I suspect . . . it’s proof that could lead to the ruin of the Stuart name.” I exhale slowly as I brace myself for what I am about to read.

Seeing the horror in Thomas’s eyes is like staring at my own reflection. I know that horror; I have lived it. “I hope I’m wrong,” I whisper, studying the envelope once more. “But something Falmouth said to me last night makes me fear the worst.”

“I’ll leave you to—”

“No,” I say, lifting my head. “I beg of you, stay. I can’t open this alone.”

“Surely, Captain Sharpe . . . ,” he starts, then trails off to let me complete the thought.

I shake my head and swallow the lump forming in my throat. “No. I suspect he already knows what’s in here. Stay with me. Please?”

He watches me for a moment, looking as though he wants to refuse. But then something in his gaze changes, and his expression shifts into one of determination as he nods. “Of course, my prince.”

I give a humorless laugh and suck in a trembling breath. “I’m not a prince,” I say, sinking back down into the chair. Hands trembling, I flip open the top of the envelope and slide out the small collection of letters inside.

Dropping the envelope into my lap, I unfold the worn papers and turn them over. The lettering is old and faded, and gone entirely along the creases where the papers have been folded, but it is still legible. I recognize Henry’s steady hand.

My Dearest Friend,

I have done a thing that could destroy my future if word gets out. I write now to beg a favor of you, and in return, I will grant you the viscountcy of the port city of Falmouth, so you might live away from court with my secret carefully hidden.

I have given in to the temptation of Eve, and eaten the apple dangled before me to its very core. I fear the seeds may poison my crown if you do not help me. When I become king, and I have the power to do so, I promise I will elevate you and your heirs to a dukedom, so long as you do this thing for me.

The girl cannot speak a word to me. She knows no English words apart from “please” and “highness.” I have kept her bound to the post of my bedchamber in Kensington Palace, where no one may find her. The servants assure me her monthly courses have stopped. I knew in my heart that it was not my fault Eleanor would not conceive, and here is my proof.

The Turkish girl will bear my child, but that child must remain clandestine, at least until a time comes when I may need him. I would send her to you to wed and do with as you please. She is beautiful and obedient, for I have broken her like an exotic mare with my mastery and virility. Raise my child as your own, and allow her to bear more for you, for she is fertile and of strong stock. Her father, and unfortunately, her young

sister, have been dealt with as Cain with Abel, and will trouble us not.

Reply in haste, my beloved friend, for I fear she will soon begin to show, and we will be unable to hide the truth of her conception. Send to me the gift of a ruby, and I will send you, in return, the girl called Yumna. Falmouth shall be your wedding present from the Crown, and the princess and I will be in attendance, to show our love for you to the realm.

Destroy this letter, or it may bring a black mark upon us both—for a bastard with the flesh of heretics and slaves would be a blight upon the House of Stuart and would surely bring about our ruination.

Henry

The lettering blurs as I reach the bottom of the page. Breathing is impossible. I blink, and the tears roll freely down my cheeks. I fold the letter before I can smudge the faded ink. I knew it to be true, and yet to read the truth so plainly from my own father's hand fills me with disgust and shame.

My clouded gaze shifts to my fingers against the parchment, and something tightens in my throat. *The flesh of heretics and slaves.* Never before has someone suggested that I was anything less because of the color of my skin. Indeed, I have always blended in fairly well with those around me. I have always known I was not the same as the pale-skinned Englishmen, but never have I considered myself *other*. Not until this moment.

Even Falmouth did not treat me differently for my outward appearance, not for *that* reason. All at once my thoughts fly to Captain Sharpe, and Billy, and Naeem. To all the men my captain has rescued. A sick feeling twists my gut as another realization settles there like milk that's gone sour. Some part of me knew when they refused to disembark the *Deliverance* at various port cities—but I truly understand now. *They* cannot hide among the

gentry, as I have done my entire life. *They* are othered the moment they enter a room. The advantages of my mixed blood has given me a disguise I never quite realized I had.

How ironic that my father's own disgust at my heritage is exactly what's led to this realization. It only deepens my shame. It should not have taken me eighteen years to reach this truth.

I get to my feet, seeking air, sucking in as deeply as I can to fill my burning lungs as the letters and envelope flutter to the floor.

Thomas, thank Christ, is quick on his feet. He drops to one knee to gather the papers. I can hear the rustle of the letters as he carefully tucks them back into the envelope, and then he is standing, his hands gripping my arms.

I am still gasping, unable to form words. Thomas draws me into his arms, too tight. So tight that it hurts, and I think I might faint from trying to breathe. "You're all right," he whispers into my hair. "You're all right, Kit."

Hearing him say my name is a shock to the system. I open my eyes and look at him, and he gives me a firm nod. And then I am sobbing. He cups the back of my head and rocks me back and forth. I recognize in this gesture the same tender comfort Captain Sharpe offered me the night I found Jeffrey Reuter's dead body.

But this is so much worse.

"He raped her," I blurt, trembling against Thomas as he supports my weight. "He raped her until she conceived, and then he *murdered* her family. *My* family."

I hate him. I hate Henry with every fiber of my being, and yet I grieve for the loss of my true father, for the love he bore for me. I held out hope, even as I fled from the palace, that his love for me was true and genuine. I held out hope that he wasn't a monster, like Sharpe had said, but simply an unfaithful husband.

Mostly, I hate him because I'm not entirely sure I *do* hate him. In the same way that I know I will never truly hate Falmouth. Perhaps I am

broken, and the curse of my conception has stained my blood and my soul. I was the destruction of my own mother, an innocent girl with no one to comfort her as Thomas comforts me now.

Falmouth was right about me. I was neither made out of love nor born out of love, and I certainly wasn't raised with love. I am cursed.

Or—I *was*.

But I'm not anymore.

"I'm all right," I say finally—because even if that's not perfectly true in this moment, I know now that I *will* be. I draw back from Thomas's arms and swallow down the thickness swelling around my tongue. "Take it out of here," I whisper.

"Shall I destroy it?" he asks.

I consider that. I consider the burning embers mere feet away, and the endless roiling sea outside. I *want* to get rid of it. I want to never see it again.

But no. I shake my head and draw in a slow, fortifying breath. "No," I breathe. "Someday my father will find out where I am. He will come for me to secure his throne, and when he does, I will rain devastation upon him with the venom of his very own words."

I wipe my cheeks with the silk of my sleeve and see Thomas wince at my carelessness. Still playing the part of the valet, even now.

"I was born out of his violence, and cursed for it. So I will become the blight upon the House of Stuart and fulfill my father's own prophecy."

Thomas refuses to leave my side for the remainder of the evening. He sits faithfully beside me, saying nothing, as we drink wine in lieu of tea and watch the embers glow inside the stove. I feel calm once again, though I am spent from the outpouring of such raw emotion. It isn't until Sharpe steps

into the cabin that Thomas rises to his feet. He bows to me, and I can't help but smile at his relentless allegiance.

"Thank you, Thomas," I say.

"It was my honor to sit at your side this evening, my prince," he replies.

I should correct him, and remind him that I'm not a prince anymore, but I just smile and nod as he stands there smoothing out his livery, glancing meaningfully at the bed before finally turning to face down Captain Sharpe.

I'm not sure what kind of threatening look Thomas sends in his direction, but from the way Sharpe's brows shoot up, it must be a fearsome thing to behold, indeed. I laugh softly as Thomas leaves the cabin, presumably to finally get some rest in the privacy of his own stateroom.

"He's a terrifying little shit," Sharpe says, staring at the closed door.

"I know, isn't it marvelous?" I ask, which earns me a snort.

Sharpe turns to face me once more and narrows his eyes at the stove beside me. "I'm not sure how I feel about *that*," he says. "Fire on a ship is a little insane, even for me."

"It's contained," I say as I watch the embers glow in the iron stove, carefully sealed shut, with a marble hearth surrounding it. "And there are pipes that run along the ceiling downstairs, so the men won't freeze."

"How very modern," Sharpe says with a smile as he approaches me. He's staring at my silk dressing gown—and, by the look in his eyes, deciding whether it's worth it to laugh at me or if I'll refuse to take it off if he does.

He raises his gaze to my face and halts for a moment. "All right there, Kitten?" he asks.

I shift in the seat and sigh. I had hoped the redness in my eyes would have faded by now, or at least be disguised by the shine of the wine I've been drinking.

"I am now," I say.

"Don't want to talk about it?" he asks, and I love him for that.

"Not particularly."

He snorts and steps toward me once more, looking like he might press the matter.

“What does Reggie stand for?” I ask before he can. “Reginald?”

He’s startled by the question. He stops short and blinks at me, then gives a laugh. “Excuse me?”

“Tydes calls you Reggie. No one else does. Before he said it, I’d never even heard your Christian name. I’ve had you in my bed and never thought to ask your name. What does it stand for?”

He steps closer and sinks onto his knees in front of me, then looks up and grins a little. “I’ve had you in *my* bed, Kitten. Not the other way around.” I think for a moment he isn’t going to answer, but then he does. “It’s short for Regulus,” he says softly. “My mother called me her prince. And now the men call me one too.”

A prince among pirates. I laugh a little and reach out to remove his hat. “So her premonition about you came true, did it?”

“Apparently so,” Captain Sharpe says.

“I’m not going to call you Regulus.”

He laughs again. “Good. I like when you call me Captain.”

I smirk a little at that and tilt my head as I admire him. “So, *Captain* . . . ,” I say, reaching out to slide my fingers along the blue silk ribbon. “What are we going to name our ship?”

We hadn’t time to name the ship in Portsmouth. The men didn’t like it, but we all agreed that getting away from England was the priority.

He considers, watching my face as he slowly slides his hands up my thighs under the dressing gown. My nightshirt rides up, and I shiver. “A ship needs a name,” he murmurs with a nod. “Bad luck to sail without one.” His hands reach my hips, and as he leans in, I let my thighs fall open to make room for his body between them.

I gasp as he tugs my hips forward in the chair, forcing my legs open just a bit wider to accommodate him. He smiles and leans his face close to mine —but not quite close enough.

I’m dizzy with the heady rush of his hands on me and his body so close to mine. I don’t lean in, though, as I normally might. Instead I let myself fall against the back of the wingback chair and catch him by the lacing of his shirt, yanking him down with me.

In the next moment his mouth is on mine, and I close my eyes to enjoy the familiar taste of him, the heat of his body on mine. Then the kiss breaks, and he brushes the tip of his nose against mine. “How about . . . the *Brine Prince*?” he whispers against my lips.

I laugh and open my eyes to look into his. I would lose myself in the deep wells of his eyes every night if I could. “That is a terrible name,” I whisper back, shaking my head, even as my chest swells with love for him. “It makes me think of shrimp. We’re *not* calling it that.”

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When I started writing *A Prince Among Pirates*, the first thing I did was announce to my local writers' group, Moonlighters' Ink, that I had started a new project.

"It's about pirates!" I said with enthusiasm.

James, the historian of the group, who wrote the *literal* textbook on piracy (*Global Piracy*, by James E. Wadsworth), offered me some very sage advice right off the bat: "Whatever you do," he said, "don't fall into the stereotypes Hollywood always does and make the pirate ship a floating democracy where everyone is gay—because that's just not accurate."

"Oh, James," I replied with unwavering glee. "You are going to hate this book."

Spoiler alert: James did not hate the book. Moonlighters' Ink has been my best resource for support and assistance while working on this project. Your feedback has been invaluable to me from day one, and without Zak's sense of humor, Ken's constant encouragement, Maddy's clever scrutiny, Jessica's infallible eye for corrections, and, of course, James's vast knowledge of history, piracy, and storytelling, there is no way this book

could have sold as successfully and as quickly as it did as an unedited first draft.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you all—you are my crew, my found family. You got me through the lowest part of my life, and you pushed me and encouraged me to continue writing. There are no words that will ever adequately express my gratitude. I hope you all know how special you are to me. You are living proof that the real treasure is time we spend together.

And I know what you're thinking: *Katie, we see each other all the time!* Treasure *is the real treasure!* I'm glad you said it—because I couldn't ask for a more perfect segue into the next person I would like to shout out. Cin, you are a real one for pulling me out of the darkness and forcing me to become obsessed with your hyperfixation of the month. Without you demanding I watch *Our Flag Means Death*, this book wouldn't exist. You helped me come up with the plot for this book, and you were always there when I was stuck and needed to bounce ideas off someone.

Courtney Collins, coauthor of Vows & Valor—*this* book is partly your baby too! Don't think I will ever forget you sitting in my Google Docs, literally reading the raw draft of this book *as I wrote it* for six weeks straight (over the holidays!) and offering me support, suggestions, and the most unhinged reactions and comments that inspired me to grind out this book! You know this story probably better than I do at this point, and I love you for always being there when I texted you in a panic about some edit or another.

A huge thank-you to my boss for letting me write and edit during office hours, and for letting me live in your house with my four plants and hundreds of cats—wait, scratch that. Reverse it. Dad, you are the best boss and father I could have ever asked for. Thank you for supporting me in this journey that could have very easily flopped (and still could!) without judgment or hesitation.

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Last, but certainly not least, thank you to *you*, dear Reader, for stepping into my imagination and going on this beautiful adventure with me. I hope it was as healing and diverting for you to read as it was for me to write. And for the baby writers peeking at the acknowledgments for ideas on who to query or who to go out on submission to, I see you and heartily encourage you to consider the names I have listed here. Good luck on your own quest and remember: Fortune favors the bold!

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